

Part I: Revelation

CHAPTER ONE

Almost sunrise

May 14th, 2029

Another barren day in Paradise.

Jack Callahan eased his buckskin gelding off the trail into a spruce and lodgepole forest. The stunted and gnarly growth bore ample evidence of fierce winter gales barreling out of British Columbia only a few miles to the north.

Under a stark slate-gray sky with a new moon and stars so close you could touch them, the north-facing slope still held snow. He and his mount climbed through shadowed and silent trees, traveling a path well worn.

For him, a mental path of words...expressions. A touch, a laugh. Choices and decisions. Something that might have made a difference.

High country often expands a man's mind. Callahan walked with the whispering wind all the way from Henry Mountain. He tumbled with whitewater in a solemn rumble where Turner Creek cascaded into the Vinal. Wove in and out among mountain heights to the wing-flutter of darting snipes. Perched alongside the Great Horned hooting across the drainage. Ran with the wolf howling on the other side of the Yaak.

Stretched across a thousand miles and ten thousand days until here was there, then was now and all became one. A fragile peace lasting only until the new day intruded, bright and unwelcome. Leaving the past to hang by a feeble thread and bringing the same old question.

Greenup well underway and twenty-four hundred black baldies scattered over hell and gone. Contracts for selective timber harvests in the southern sections. Ninety miles of fence, sixteen culverts, two bridges and eight gates in need of repair.

What's the point?

Better damn well find the answer someday. And no better place to try, for this was *the* place – the *only* place in all this space.

The trail wound between twin peaks, but Buck knew the way and they soon crossed over to the south face, where the ground fell away at a breathless angle – dropping deep into a water-worn crevasse.

Callahan dismounted, leaving the gelding ground-reined. Twenty paces brought him to the cleft, a shoulder-wide crack in the rock face that appeared to extend deep into the interior. He paused, feeling the mountain's breath against his cheek. Faintly sulfurous. Warm and humid. A place in need of exploration.

Some day.

Pushing past the opening and around the ledge to the eastern face, he found the rock with a view. The best seat in the house. Sarah had liked them all, but this one was special. The Womb of the Mother, she called it. Her source, she said. A connection – a spiritual link he could only scarcely perceive and never understood.

He leaned back against the wind-scoured ledge, feeling the bite of cold-soaked stone through the tough denim shell of his jacket. Beyond the rampart, fog flowed at an

unhurried pace down the drainage to lower elevations. The ravine below was lost in shadow save for a glimmer of the lakes within the trees.

Wouldn't be long now.

Eyes closed. Consciousness stole silently away.

And there it was.

A blood red glow through his eyelids banished the salve of sleep. For an instant she was beside him – her hand in his – her head on his shoulder. And, by God, that made everything *right*.

He opened his eyes to a bright new day. Two eagles already aloft. A flight of Snow or Canadas coming in from the south, their distant chorus almost inaudible. Buck rumbled and pawed at the moss.

Time to go to work.

*Mauna Kea Observatory
A few minutes past noon
The same day*

Melody Lucero slammed shut the driver's door on the AWD rental. When the door rebounded, she slammed it again with no better results. She wrenched it open to find the seat belt draped over the latch. The third time she shut it gently for it made no sense to take frustrations out on a rental.

Hitching the strap of her briefcase over a shoulder, she climbed the stairway to the administration center serving the Gemini eight-meter. A trim and fit woman of thirty-one, Melody attacked the steps as she had most obstacles in life – lead, follow or get out of the way – a motto she lived by. Her shoulder-length auburn hair glistened in midday rays blasting out of Hawaii's violaceous vault. The rarefied atmosphere fourteen

thousand feet above sea level scarcely slowed her purposeful stride. She had reached the uppermost step when someone called out from the parking lot.

“Mel! Hold up a minute, will you?”

She turned to discover Jason Liddy struggling up the stairway. He joined her on the platform and paused to regain his breath. “Jeez, Mel. I thought you were in Aruba.”

“Past tense, Jay.”

Liddy, a red-faced, balding scientist in his middle forties, hitched his sagging belt over a bulging battle he was slowly losing. He glanced at the doorway behind her and said, “So, how was it?”

“Eight days and no update on my program. I never should’ve left.”

“I tried to tell you, Mel. I left you a voice-mail and an e-mail.”

“I couldn’t log in. Tell me what?”

Liddy glanced away and started for the entrance. Melody followed after him. “Jay?” *Now what? Sag-3B de-listed from the current project runs on the website. Her password no longer worked for the secure areas, and now Liddy making a big mystery out of everything.*

He passed his cardkey through the slot and pulled open the door. His eyes darted away, toward the depths of the Pacific. “Didn’t you read your mail?” They both entered the foyer. A security agent on the far side of the service counter glanced once at Melody and lifted his handset.

“I just said --”

“Hard copy. The notice went out a week ago.”

“I came straight up from Kona. What notice?”

“Jeez, Mel. I don’t know what to say.”

Tingling rippled beneath her scalp and settled in her chest, but impatience overcame anxiety. “Then don’t say anything.” Melody dug into the briefcase for her cardkey. She motioned toward the inner door. “Are you going in or not?”

“Liddy! You’re late.”

Both Melody and the older astronomer turned as one. Approaching two meters in height, the imposing form of chief administrator Hector Williston stood in the inner passageway to the Gemini dome. “If you’re not prepared, you’ll miss your window. I will not guarantee another one this month.”

Liddy dipped his head. “Right.” To Melody, he murmured, “I’m sorry, Mel. I really am.” He hustled past her and disappeared into the dome’s interior.

Williston took a step forward and said, “Lucero. Why are you here?”

Melody faced him head on – three-piece Giorgio Armani, Versace silk tie, Lucchese ostrich boots and all. “Let’s start with what happened to Sagittarius 3B?”

He shrugged. “Canceled.”

“Whose brilliant idea was that?”

“Your anomaly does not exist.”

“Bullshit!” From her case she drew out extrapolations that had occupied much of her waking hours in the Caribbean. She opened it to the critical page, shoved it under his nose and added, “Tell me this doesn’t exist.”

Williston slipped the brief from her grasp. He scanned it and said, “An atmospheric occlusion.” Before Melody could react he added, “These documents are confidential. You’ve no authority to take them off the property.”

For an instant she couldn’t speak. “Under what rock have you been hiding, Hector? This is *my* project.” She reached for the brief but he folded it and placed it into his jacket pocket.

“We’ve trimmed our staff somewhat.” His smile was cold. “With your imaginative talents, you should find a home somewhere.”

Was this what Jason...? Or some sort of malicious threat? Melody fought an irrational urge to claw his face to ribbons. She crossed her arms to still their trembling. After a deep breath, she said, “What is it with you, Hector? What’s your problem?”

His smile never wavered. “You’re fired, Lucero. Clear enough?”

Melody turned away, willing anger to come before sorrow. She faced him again. “Higher authority might have a different view.”

Williston slowly shook his head. “Your anomaly doesn’t exist. This,” he tapped his breast pocket, “is fantasy unworthy of further consideration. You’re an astrophysicist who left under a cloud. What have you got?”

“The data, you idiot.” Melody spun away, pushed through the security doors, and rapidly descended the stairway toward the parking lot.

Williston appreciated the swinging symmetry of her departure. Champagne wouldn’t cut it. A lobotomy, maybe. And leather handcuffs. At least two pair. He sighed again, drew out his cell phone, and punched a series of numbers. “This is Williston, sir. We may have a problem.”

* * *

By the time Melody descended below the 10k marker, despair replaced outrage. Assignment to Mauna Kea represented a career pinnacle for anyone involved in sky-watch, and she had blown it. Her descent toward the Pacific represented a metaphorical antithesis of the meteoric swath she had cut through her peers. Magna-cum-laude from

Cal Tech, the fellowship at MIT, an internship at JPL, the Fields Medal at an improbable age of twenty-four – all pointed to the top.

Now what?

The miles passed as if in an instant and she missed the turnoff to her condo in Hawi. She reversed course. After spinning into her carport twenty minutes later, she killed the engine and dropped her forehead against the rim of the steering wheel.

Melody squeezed shut her eyes. Pops' sacrifice could not be in vain. Of his illness she had been blithely unaware, immersed in the self-centered ignorance of youth, piling on courses and credits, and debt, in an orgiastic preparation for the pursuit of the Holy Grail – the original work.

She let the tears flow. A small victory, to cry alone.

So now what?

Retreat? Surrender and submission? She knew what Williston wanted. His carefully constructed contrivances and subtle satirical suggestions had gone ignored but not unrecognized. No chance.

Flight and fight then. To where and with what? Melody sniffed and wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. Sagittarius 3B was not an atmospheric occlusion. Not hardly. And certainly no fantasy.

Washington, New York and Boston were where the power resided. Mauna Kea was a great platform for discovery, but decisions were made elsewhere.

Where to start? Fly or drive? Flying was faster, but required a lot of resources. She reached into her purse and pulled out her checkbook. Post vacation blues. Twenty-seven hundred dollars and change. The credit card would suffice for some air-travel but it had limitations and she needed infinite mobility.

Drive then. Which meant Seattle first.

She retrieved her cell phone and dialed the 800 number for Hawaiian Air.

A flight to Oahu at three would meet a connection to San Francisco that departed at nine-fifteen. The five-hour transit and three-hour time difference would put her into SFO in time to catch a commuter flight to Seattle. Standby on that one. She confirmed the flights using the credit card.

Melody glanced at her watch. Ninety minutes. Wash and repack. Hardcopy, flashcards, data files. Not a second to spare. She leapt out of the vehicle, collected her bags and dashed for the front door.

After gathering the mail and dumping her soiled clothing into the washer, she raced up the stairway to her office. She plugged her palmtop into the network and dumped a copy of her summary to the printer. While it was spooling, she considered. The data on the palmtop was all she had, and the subject too critical to risk its loss.

She opened a browser connection and logged into the automated backup utility. Remembering passwords had always been difficult, and it took several moments of thumbing through the notebook in her purse before she found it. The contents of folder SAGB3 took seven minutes to upload. Etching a spare flashcard, eleven more.

The washer beeped the end of its cycle and Melody dashed down to move the load into the dryer.

Transportation.

In the kitchen, she drew a Diet Coke from the fridge and retrieved the wi-fi phone from its cradle. Numbers were another thing that always slipped away. Fortunately, this particular number was saved in the speed dialer. The other end rang repeatedly without the recorder picking up. Which usually meant the ringer was switched off.

Melody peered at her watch. Fifty-nine minutes. “C’mon ‘Lissa. Throw Tom, Dick and Harry out of bed and answer the stupid phone.”

No luck.

She hung up and ran up to her office again. After repacking her attaché case, she scanned the mail. Bills, advertisements and credit card offers, the latter outnumbering everything else. A plain brown envelope from the Observatory was near the bottom. She slit it open and discovered the termination notice included four weeks of severance pay, already electronically deposited into her checking account.

Melody closed her eyes in a quick prayer of thanks and dropped into her chair. Six thousand was a lot better than twenty-seven hundred. Catching her lower lip in her teeth, she tore open one of the credit card bills, logged on, and transferred four thousand as payment. Breathing room.

The dryer buzzed.

She returned to the laundry room, unceremoniously dumped the contents of the dryer into her valise and headed for the front door with just enough time to make the hop to Honolulu.

As luck would have it, the flight experienced a maintenance delay and the layover in Oahu shrank to less than twenty minutes. First call for boarding the flight to the mainland had already taken place by the time Melody checked in. She decided to call Seattle one more time. The answering machine picked up on the first ring.

I know what you want, Darling. Make a wish and it might come true.

Beep.

Stifling a laugh, Melody said, “Lissa, they’re going to arrest you again. I need my car. Can you get it out of storage and meet me at the airport? I’m coming in from San Francisco at nine. Horizon Air. *Chao.*”

The final boarding call issued from the loudspeakers. She hung up and dashed for the jetway. The Boeing 777 lifted off and turned eastward over the Pacific eleven minutes afterward.

CHAPTER TWO

Five hours later, a hand on her shoulder nudged Melody to consciousness. Someone had kindly placed a blanket over her while she slept. A flight attendant bent close, a fortyish blonde with a pageboy cut and sympathetic eyes. “We’ll be landing in twenty minutes if you want to freshen up.”

Melody straightened in her seat. “Do I look that bad?”

“If you ever looked bad, hon, the rest of us don’t have a prayer.”

With a grateful smile, Melody replied, “Thanks for the blanket.”

The attendant patted her arm and moved aft.

Melody had been fortunate. The only seats available when she boarded were first class, which had meant an exceptionally comfortable and quiet flight.

Her effort in the washroom turned out to be less than effective. She had to settle for clearing away day-old cosmetics and chasing away the most prominent wrinkles from her navy blue silk suit jacket and skirt with a damp paper towel. The blouse was a lost cause, but then she was only going home after all. Should have changed into something more comfortable. From the emergency pack in her purse, she reconstructed a minimal *face*. It would have to do.

When she returned from the restroom, a glass of orange juice and a croissant were poised on her sidebar. Hunger awoke – insatiable, insistent – and the croissant only a

meager offering. When nothing remained but crumbs, another appeared, along with a knowing wink from the blonde.

Melody was among the first to disembark. She hastened into the terminal, studying the signs overhead to discover the route to baggage claim. Movement to the right caught her eye. Two men in dark overcoats peering in her direction. They immediately glanced beyond her and one of them retrieved a two-way radio from his coat pocket and spoke into it. In the next moment, they swept past and toward the gate.

Again Melody was fortunate. Her dark green valise popped from the bowels of baggage beltways almost immediately. The standby flight meant she could not check it until her seat was confirmed. She dragged it clear, extended the handle and headed for the exit. According to the terminal map, gate 74 was about as far from gate 22 as it could be and still reside in the same airport.

Near the exit, a uniformed black man wearing a security shoulder patch moved toward the doorway. He paused, glancing in her direction. The angular planes of his face beneath the mirrored sunglasses gave birth to a creepy sensation, as if those oversized, silver eyes burned away her clothing, leaving her naked and exposed. The sudden gap-toothed grin didn't help.

He opened the door for her with a bow.

“Thank you,” she murmured, feeling like an ass.

“Where you goin’, Miss?” he asked.

“Terminal three, gate seventy-four.”

“Cross to the outer island. Shuttle will be by in a moment.”

“Thank you again.”

In the darker shadows beyond the reach of the terminal lamps, Melody parked her valise beside a concrete pillar and sat on it. *New York and Washington are a long way*

off. I need to get a grip or I'll never make it. Meditation and mental relaxation exercises helped, but not as much as she had hoped. Twenty minutes passed before she noticed a shuttle bus with a sign that read *Inter-terminal* depart from the inner island.

Had she misunderstood? Melody stood and turned toward the entrance to the terminal when the sound of running feet drew a quick glance over her shoulder. A bulky man in full flight, racing directly toward her.

Black sweats.

Ski mask.

In the next instant, he slammed into her, hurling her against the pillar. The back of her head struck the concrete surface with force enough to ignite a flash of light behind her eyes. The running feet faded, and she realized her briefcase had been stripped from her shoulder.

Melody lurched upright and turned, but dizziness claimed her and she almost fell. Someone gripped her arm and steadied her. It was the black security agent.

“That man hurt you, miss?”

“I’m fine,” she hissed through the pain. “He stole my briefcase. It has my laptop inside.”

“You wait right here. I’ll catch him.”

Melody nodded, but the security man had already departed. Only the slap of his leather shoes sounded in the darkness. And they too soon faded.

She sat on the valise again as her head throbbed and nausea threatened. Both ailments slowly dissipated. She glanced at her watch. Six-eighteen. The gray light of dawn in the east. Forty-two minutes before her flight.

Where was the security agent?

She stood and dragged her valise back to the terminal entrance. Almost as she reached the doorway, a San Francisco police officer strode through.

“Thank God,” she murmured.

A compact man. Fit and alert, which bespoke of a professional demeanor she found reassuring. “Can I help you, ma’am?”

“You caught him?”

“Caught who?”

“The man who stole my briefcase. Airport security chased after him almost twenty minutes ago.”

The officer drew out a notepad and said, “Your name, ma’am?”

“Melody Lucero. They must have caught him by now.”

He jotted her name, the time and then pressed the button on the mike by his collarbone. He spoke swiftly and concisely, detailing the events as Melody relayed them. Finally, he shook his head.

“There’s no report. Any of our officers would have called it in as soon as he began the pursuit.”

Melody frowned. “He didn’t have one of those.” She pointed at his two-way radio.”

“We all carry radios. It’s how we coordinate our response.”

“He wasn’t a police officer. He was airport security.”

Several seconds of silence passed, during which the officer’s face went deadpan. He scribbled some notes in his pad and finally said, “Ma’am, terminal security is handled by federal agents, who are plainclothed, and by the San Francisco Police department, all in uniform.”

With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Melody replied, “This man wore a white shirt with a red badge on his shoulder that said *Security* in white letters.”

“Can you describe him?”

The reality of the situation swept through her. The briefcase was gone. No laptop. No backup flashcards.

Nothing left but the data on the Internet server. And now everything depended on retrieving those files. As soon as possible, lest they disappear as well.

She glanced at her watch. “Look, it’s obvious I’ve been duped. I *must* make my flight to Seattle. Can we do this by phone?”

“It’s best if we get the details now, ma’am.”

Melody subdued the urge to scream. In a tightly controlled, lower pitch, she said, “Give me a number I can call later.”

He scribbled in his pad, tore off the page and handed it to her. “You can reach me here. Any time. Day or night.”

“Thank you.”

The officer pressed his mike and spoke again. “A patrol car will be by in a moment. They’ll take you to your terminal.”

She touched his arm. “Thank you again.”

He tipped his hat and swung toward the terminal. At the entrance he turned. “Don’t forget that call, Miss Lucero.”

During the two-hour hop to Seattle, Melody’s apprehension intensified. It would be easy to write off the incident in San Francisco as pure chance, a random purse snatch. But it had been very slick, and that made her a little anxious at every stranger’s glance, of which there were many. The sensation left her irritable and fatigued.

The commuter jet touched down and taxied to the terminal, to Concourse D. Nobody met her at the security gate.

Perhaps in Baggage Claim.

The main terminal was only minutes away, but this time delivery of her valise seemed to take hours. Still no Lissa! *All too typical.* A few minutes after nine-thirty, Melody exited the terminal and hurried out to the passenger pick-up island. And waited.

Ten o'clock came and went. She called three times on her cell. Ten-twenty. *Enough already.* She returned to the taxi island. The fare would top fifty dollars but the certainty of arrival was worth it.

When the taxi pulled up in front of her Tudor-style two-story on Seattle's north side, Melody sighed with relief. She paid the driver and dragged her valise from the back seat. The cab jetted down the inclined street toward the city's center and she climbed the six short steps to the doorway on the right. The mailbox was open, as was the main door. A wooden wedge propped open the screened outer door. *My Porsche is probably in the garage and the fuel-cell empty. Lissa, dearie, I'm going to wring your scrawny neck.* Not hardly, but the idea had merit.

Melody sighed again and stepped through onto the landing. She set down the valise in the foyer and kicked off her shoes. The carpet covered stairway scarcely squeaked, and she avoided the left side of the third step from childhood practice. Lissa's upstairs office door at the end of the hall was open and she heard movement from inside. She was about to announce her presence when a stranger bent over a file cabinet near a window. A man's voice behind the door murmured something unintelligible. The dark-clothed intruder turned his head and replied.

He wore a ski mask.

Melody flattened against the wall on the same side as the office door, a silent scream caught in her throat. Her breathing sounded like a runner's near the end of a 10K sprint. Her pulse raced and paralyzing fear flooded her chest.

The voice behind the door spoke again, insistent. Something about the other bedroom. The masked man turned with a protesting growl and approached the exit.

Melody silently slipped across the hallway and into the bathroom. She ducked behind the door and peered between the hinges. In the foyer below, her valise was in plain sight.

Heavy footsteps passed the bathroom entrance and the masked man entered the bedroom opposite, leaving the door open.

Trapped!

Through the gap, she could see him pawing in the closet.

The phone rang and the intruder froze. After two rings, Lissa's recorded voice said, "Mel! If you're there, get out now!" The message was followed by a beep and the caller hung up.

Damn good idea.

The intruder in the bedroom returned to his search. Melody slipped out from behind the bathroom door and stepped soundlessly across the hallway. She tensed to pass the threshold of the bedroom, but the second intruder shouted. "Kincaid!"

"Yeah!"

"Give me a hand, will'ya?"

Adrenaline surged into her veins. She could not retreat to the bathroom unseen. There was nowhere to hide.

"Just a sec."

Melody risked a quick glance into the bedroom. The interloper was pulling the remaining drawers from the dresser. She slipped back into the bathroom just before he turned and stepped into the hallway. The moment he vanished into the office, she fled from the bathroom and down the stairs. The third step's squeak sounded like a scream from hell.

She clutched her shoes in one hand, the valise in the other and charged through the entryway. The corner of her valise dislodged the wooden wedge from the screen door and it slammed shut just as she reached the bottom step.

When Melody turned north on the sidewalk, two hooded faces appeared in the front bedroom window. They vanished immediately.

Run!

Grasping her pumps, purse pinned under her elbow, she sprinted uphill in her stocking feet. The valise banged against her knee and thigh with every stride. She had managed only forty or fifty paces before the two men crashed through the screen door and poured out onto the lawn.

To hell with this!

She pitched the shoes into a neighbor's lawn and hiked her skirt to her hips. *In a pair of real shoes, I'd give these assholes 10K the hard way.*

The valise was a killer. With a small cry of frustration, Melody zigged into an alley between the houses. She jerked open the plastic lid of a nearby Dumpster and tossed it inside, figuring she would return for it if she escaped. If not, it didn't matter.

She turned into a cross alley as the pursuers barged around the first corner. Up ahead, a red Pontiac Galactic blocked the alley, its turbine running and someone at the wheel. The driver leaned on the horn. A teenage girl ejected from the backdoor of an

adjacent house and leapt into the car. The driver tromped on the accelerator and the Pontiac snarled away in a plume of blue-white smoke and squealing tires.

Inspiration came in a flash and Melody dove between two nearby dumpsters. She edged behind one of them. Seconds later, the two masked men raced up the cross alley. Their pace faltered and they paused just beyond her refuge.

“Sonofabitch!” one groaned. Both men removed their masks and one drew a radio from his pocket.

“Red Pontiac,” he said. “Washington plates. Suffix letters are GRL. I didn’t get the rest. Moving north.” He switched off and turned to his partner. “Don’t that beat all.”

“You want to go back and finish?”

“She’ll probably call the cops on her cell. Let’s hang tight and see what happens with the Pontiac.”

The two men retreated to the alley junction, and although Melody could still hear their voices she could no longer understand what they said. Fifteen minutes later everything was still.

The clatter of an ancient diesel engine and the whine of hydraulics broke the silence. Something metallic clanged. The diesel roared a second time, a little closer now. The sequence was repeated. Realization swept over her.

Oh, no! *No!*

Melody pushed out of concealment and ran to the cross alley. A refuse truck roared by, turned the corner onto the next street and vanished. She returned to the dumpster where she had hidden her valise.

Empty.

CHAPTER THREE

*The next day, in the Yaak Valley
Early Afternoon*

Mending fence eats a hole in a day faster than a song dog can swallow a snowshoe. The sun zipped past zenith, the canteens ran dry, breakfast was a distant memory, and Jack Callahan was out of staples.

What the hell? Time for a town run anyway.

Two hours and forty-odd miles later, he arrived in Libby. His list was extensive and burned through the remainder of the afternoon.

Outside the Farmer's Exchange, Thor Martensen dropped a fourth carton onto the rear deck and shoved it in beside three others Callahan had picked up at Epperson Mountaineering. Martensen stepped back and, as Callahan closed the doors, said, "Climbin' yar mountain, J.C.?" Tall and rangy, jawbone wide and deep enough to serve as a wing-plow, the blue-eyed Swede had lost some of his native Minnesotan accent over the years. Some, but not much.

Callahan laughed. "Something like that."

"New rig. That big Dodge giving ya trouble?"

"John's off to school with it. If he's to drive in California, it's the next best thing to sending him armed."

Martensen also laughed. "Already? Semester don't start for a few months yet."

“Another summer program. Can’t say I blame him. Finished third year already – in the big league now.”

“Cal Tech. Woowee. Spendy, youbetcha.”

“No bet, Thor.” Callahan stuck out his hand. “Thanks for the help.”

“Thanks for yar business, J.C.” The proprietor strode for the entrance, but paused and turned. “Tell Aubrey, if you see him, his wire and twine are in.”

“I’ll do that.” Callahan climbed into the Vaquero. He pulled out onto U.S. 2, traveled three blocks and then swerved into the Conoco station on the corner. The fuel gauge read one-quarter, and in this country you didn’t go home on less than half. He braked alongside a diesel pump and noticed two other Vaquero APVs at the adjacent island. Same carryall model and same charcoal color. On the hood of the foremost, four men bent over a map. At least two carrying concealed – shoulder holsters. One with a load-bearing harness. Military boots. One talking on a cell, another speaking softly to a GPS.

Interesting.

Callahan thrust the pump handle into the filler neck, started the flow and sauntered over toward the other Vaqueros. The foursome looked up at his approach, their features implacable and unfriendly.

“You gents look lost,” Callahan offered.

A gray-haired tall man with a hatchet face shook his head. “We’re not lost.”

“Looking for something in particular?”

Gray-hair folded the map. He straightened and said, “This is a private conversation, Bud.”

“No problem.” Callahan turned away. *Town men. Arrogant jerks – although ‘jerks’ wasn’t quite the right word.* He entered the filling station’s emporium. After

purchasing a copy of the *Western News*, which circulated Tuesdays and Thursdays, he started for his rig.

The pair of Vaqueros charged abreast for the exit, turn signals showing opposite directions. An old Land Cruiser turning off U.S. 2 toward the entrance was forced to brake before the blaring horn of one of the Vaqueros. The gray APVs swerved around the entering driver and departed.

The Land Cruiser continued into the station, the driver's mouth going a mile a minute. Miles Whitaker. Callahan paused midway between the islands and waited. The Land Cruiser braked to a stop beside him and the driver's window rolled down.

A round-faced man with a full beard and eyebrows jumping like caterpillars on a hot plate, Whitaker rasped, "You see those jerks?"

"The editor of the *Western News* ought to do better than that."

Whitaker's expression brightened. "Marplots."

Callahan laughed. "You got me." He drew out his pad and scribbled the word at the top of the page. "Meaning?"

"Stupid, officious meddlers whose interference compromises the success of an undertaking – such as me trying to catch up with you."

"I stopped by your office."

"For God's sake, Jack, you come to town every other month. I'm supposed to know when?"

"A sortileger would."

"You made that up."

"Check it."

"I will. Did you bring it?"

Callahan stepped back from the window, and turned toward his rig. “Bring what, Miles?” He finished fueling as the newspaperman bailed out of the Land Cruiser and followed him over to the Vaquero.

“C’mon, Jack, after your last story, every house back east is screaming for more. Tell me you finished it.”

“I finished it.” Callahan opened the back door and fetched a manuscript box. “And there you go.” He handed it to Whitaker, who acted as if someone had just passed him the Holy Grail.

“Hallelujah! What’s it about?”

Callahan shrugged. “Survival in the wilderness. Kind of an end-of-the-world story.”

Whitaker’s bulging blues assumed a serious cast. “Jack, let me run with this.”

“You’re the agent.”

“Bless you, my man.” Whitaker climbed back into his rig. “Say hello to J.J. for me.”

“He’s off to school. I’ll send a note.”

Whitaker paused and leaned toward the window. “I don’t know how you stand the solitude, my friend. It would drive me crazy.” After an uncomfortable silence, he quietly added, “It’s been ten years. You need a bit of gynography.”

“A woman’s touch?”

Whitaker laughed. “OK, it’s a draw. Sarah wouldn’t have wanted you to be alone, Jack. Nor J.J. either.”

Callahan dropped his gaze to the street. He faced Whitaker again and said, “A woman like her comes once in a lifetime.”

“You’d be surprised, my friend.” Whitaker winked, shifted into reverse and backed out from between the islands. Through the still-open window, he called, “I’ll send you an e-mail.” The Land Cruiser rolled out onto U.S. 2 and wound up through the gears.

Fifty minutes passed before Callahan approached the boundaries of the Bar-C. He turned off Forest Road 68 and wheeled his rig through the switchbacks that led down into the high-mountain meadow comprising the bulk of his pastureland. He had almost reached the valley floor when a gray Vaquero rocketed around the curve ahead.

Callahan braked but the other driver did not. Gray-hair. The vehicles passed almost mirror to mirror. A second later, a stone struck his windshield leaving a star-shaped crack almost an inch in diameter.

The hell they weren’t lost!

Callahan ground to a stop and waited until the dust in his rear-view cleared. He meant to have a word with that damned *marplot*, but the other vehicle never slowed.

Not for the first time, Callahan considered petitioning the Forest Service to close the public road beyond his ranch. Once done, he could legally gate his property and end the stream of crazies acting like the valley was their private playground. The thought quickly faded. He was fifth generation Montanan, and did not countenance gated roads.

He checked his watch when approaching the turnoff to the ranch house. It wasn’t yet six and that meant more than three hours of daylight. Time enough for a quick fence check along the right-of-way. Tomorrow, if it didn’t rain, he would tackle the western boundary on horseback.

Time well spent – for the high winds of the previous week had downed four trees. Two hours with the ever-present chainsaw and fencing tools solved most problems.

While the Stihl zipped through fallen spruce and firs, Callahan recalled that three months would see his forty-fourth birthday. And the eleventh year since that fateful October weekend. The nights were the worst, when subconscious memories often assumed the full weight of reality. Years became days and the future portended a bleak and inhospitable place.

Dusk was well advanced when Callahan rolled over the western cattleguard on his way back to the house. Immediately before entering the valley proper, he wheeled around a curve and discovered a car in the road, facing in the same direction. The driver, momentarily caught staring into her rearview, was a woman. She gunned the engine and the white Porsche spewed gravel and rocks. One of those turbine-powered high-tech models. In a few seconds, it vanished in a cloud of dust.

“Lady, with a rig like that, you *have* to be lost.”

Callahan continued his leisurely pace and, ten minutes later, swung into the long, uphill driveway leading into the ranch. When he crested the hill, there was the Porsche bellied right up to the gate.

The woman climbed out and, as she approached, Callahan made a quick appraisal. About five-six. Well proportioned – wearing an ivory jersey cardigan. Low cut and form fitting. Beneath the bewitching motion, she wore one of those flowered, calf-length skirts with pockets. Platform shoes, gold ankle straps. A sinuous stride – like a runway walk. Auburn, almost red, shoulder-length hair. Hoop earrings and lots of bangles. In spite of all that glitter, it was obvious she wasn't having a good day.

He rolled down his window, but his search for something clever to say ended when she braced a small-caliber automatic on the windowsill and pointed it directly at his chin.

CHAPTER FOUR

Callahan's anger surged and he tapped the kill switch beneath the seat lever by his left hip. The turbine died. When she didn't say anything straight away, he growled, "Rethink your plan, lady."

"Why are you following me?"

Her voice was melodic but tense, and she could not keep the tremor out of it. Her startlingly bright blue eyes glistened with emotion. She was trim, overly so, and he thought she might benefit by another ten or fifteen pounds. He remembered the men in the other Vaqueros and felt a jab of compassion. Still, he was on the wrong end of a firearm. "You're trespassing."

"Liar! Nobody lives out here."

"I do." Callahan motioned with his chin. "Beyond the gate." He recognized the momentary indecision in her eyes and added, "Why don't you put that away before someone gets hurt."

Her lips hardened and she stepped away from the window. "Back up and let me out."

“A pleasure.” Callahan flipped the kill switch closed and turned the key. When the turbine wound up, he shifted into reverse and steered into a turnout about eighty yards back from the gate.

The woman climbed into the Porsche, which started with a throaty snarl. He noted the California plates as she swept past him, backing all the way down the hill at reckless speed. A vanity plate. *Stardoc*.

When the exhaust whine faded, Callahan returned to the gate, unlocked and drove through, dismissing the urge to close and lock it. Aubrey MacKenna often stopped by on the way down from his logging operation. A pint of ale and a quiet game of rummy between two widowers would be a good way to end an unlikely day.

Callahan stowed the Vaquero in the heavy equipment shed. He unloaded his cargo except for the mountaineering supplies and headed for the ranch house. The glorious strains of Johannes Brahms filled the great room while he built a seven-log fire to kill the late spring chill. He split some redskin potatoes, diced up a few carrots and added them to a simmering pot of antelope stew.

In the study, he tapped the mouse to bring the workstation out of hibernation. Icons indicated email, but most of it was spam and other unsolicited junk. Whitaker had requested an electronic copy of the manuscript, so Callahan attached it to a reply and uploaded the file. Bandwidth to the satellite was variable, but tonight was a good one and eight hundred kilobytes transmitted in less than a minute.

Hissing from the stove meant an over-boiling pot. He turned down the heat and had just put the coffee on when the wrought iron knocker struck its plate at the front door. Callahan removed two bottles of Alaskan Amber from the fridge and went to greet his neighbor.

Instead of MacKenna's robust form, it was the woman. Goosebumps covered her arms, which were wrapped under breasts crowned with insistent nipples. His first reaction was one of pleasure. To hell with Aubrey. And then he remembered the gun.

"I ran out of gas," she said.

"A long walk to town."

Her dismay was obvious and genuine. He could not resist. "This isn't armed robbery I take it."

She reached into her skirt pocket, withdrew the automatic, and pointed it at his chest. "I can pay."

Callahan studied her face, which carried a wisp of a smile. He couldn't read her, but was about to tell her to take a hike when the smile reached her eyes and she pulled the trigger.

A thin stream of liquid struck the third button of his shirt.

Shock and surprise chased through him, one after the other. His anger peaked and burst like a bubble. He laughed lightly, a humor born of relief.

She lifted the automatic, the knuckles of her gun-hand pressed to her lips, and stifled a giggle.

Her humor was infectious and he laughed again. "Damn, that thing looks real."

She pocketed the pseudo weapon. "It's supposed to. You should have seen your face. Am I forgiven?" she added.

Callahan sighed and waved her inside. He lifted one of the beers. "I don't suppose..."

She followed him to the kitchen, where she leaned against the counter and shook her head. "Something warm would be nice. I'm freezing."

"Didn't you bring a coat?"

“I left it in the car to keep it warm.”

“Touché.” Callahan returned the bottles to the fridge and poured a cup of coffee. He offered cream and sugar, but she took it black. “I’ll be back in a moment,” he said, and soon returned with a Carhartt waist-length jacket. “Try this.”

“Wow. That’s heavy enough to be bullet-proof.” It was about six sizes too large, but she snuggled into it anyway.

“Wave that squirt gun at the wrong people and you might wish it was.” He indicated her stone-scarred and dusty shoes. “I hope you didn’t have far to walk in those.”

Callahan studied her features, which were not quite exotic, but unusual nonetheless. Heart-shaped face with a small chin and dainty up-turned nose. Lips naturally poised as if for a kiss, full and inviting. Quite unlike the typical flat-faced supermodel beauty and in his opinion, far more striking. Her eyes were exceptional. Large and widely spaced – with a touch of an almond shape. Exquisite.

Those baby blues acknowledged his comment and he noted how her expressions nimbly metamorphosed from cynicism to child-like delight. He much preferred the latter. “It seemed like ten miles,” she said. “Who would believe dirt roads in this day and age.”

“Any road is a luxury in these parts. Where are you from?”

“Seattle.” She set her cup down. “And I should keep moving. Do you have any fuel?”

“You bet.” Callahan shrugged into his coat and fetched his keys. He led her to the heavy equipment shed, where he loaded a tow strap into the Vaquero.

“What’s that for?”

He nodded toward a fifty-gallon tank just outside the shed. “In this case, we can’t bring the gas to the car.”

Twenty minutes later, Callahan replaced the nozzle. When she opened her purse, he said, “This one’s on the house.”

Her expression softened. “Now I feel bad.”

“Stay for dinner and we’ll call it even.”

She looked small and lost in the bulky Carhartt, and her eyes betrayed her hunger. She unconsciously swallowed and licked her upper lip. Callahan chuckled and said, “When’s the last time you had a good meal?”

Her gaze dropped to her purse. “I don’t remember.”

Callahan gently grasped her elbow and steered her toward the house. “It’s settled then.”

They entered through the back door, which led directly into the kitchen. The aroma of the stew had immediate effect. She sagged against the counter. “I think I’m going to faint.” Her smile said, *not likely*.

He took her coat. “Come sit by the fire. I’ll dish up dinner.”

“Wow!” she whispered when they entered the great room.

Radiance poured from the blazing logs. Twenty feet over their heads, two fans washed the cathedral space with a gentle tropical breeze. From the granite hearth, a massive fieldstone chimney soared to a ceiling supported by twenty-four-inch rough-hewn logs. Strategically mounted track lights eliminated most shadows.

Callahan drew a large pillow from a divan and tossed it onto the carpet before the fireplace. “Make yourself comfortable.”

In the kitchen, he ladled the stew, poured her some Cabernet, and returned to the great room. His guest was standing by the bookcase, studying the pictures on the upper shelves. She moved to the divan before the hearth, sprawled like she owned the place,

and dropped the pillow into her lap. Callahan passed her a bowl then sat in the opposite corner.

The track lights overhead diminished her beauty somewhat – accentuating lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth, the lack of luster in her hair. *She's been run hard, and for a lot of years.* He figured she might be pushing forty.

They ate in silence for several moments before she lifted her gaze to his, and studied him with a bold and quizzical smile.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Big.”

“Big?”

“Big country, big houses and big men. I’ve acted like a bitch and you’ve treated me like a queen.”

“I was asking about the stew. I’m Jack Callahan.”

“Lucero. Some of my friends call me Mel, although that can lead to confusion. Glad to have met you, Jack.”

Her bowl was already empty. “How about a refill?”

“Please. What is this stuff?”

“Speedgoat stew.”

“What?”

“Antelope. Pronghorns. We hunt them on the east side.”

“Of your ranch?”

He laughed. “Of the Rockies.”

“You people speak a different language out here.”

“I don’t doubt it.” He stood and fetched her bowl. When he returned from the kitchen, she cocked her head and said, “So, Jack. You live here alone?”

“No. Well ... yes, I guess. My son’s off to college.”

“Which college?”

“Cal Tech. John’s majoring in genetics.”

“You must be proud. The woman in the pictures is your wife?”

“Sarah.” He could not evade a twinge of pain. “She’s gone too.”

“Divorced?”

“Passed away.”

Compassion flowed from her eyes before she closed them and looked away.

“That sucks,” she whispered.

Callahan placed his now empty bowl on the coffee table. He found her choice of words bemusing. “It certainly does,” he finally said.

She finished her stew, placed the bowl on the hearth, and reclined with the pillow under her elbow. “Why do you live out here, Jack? We must be fifty miles from civilization. Your ranch must be big too.”

“Ninety-one sections.”

She sipped her wine. “Tell a city girl what a section is.”

“A square mile.”

Her face blanked with surprise. “Ninety-one square miles! That’s practically obscene.”

“Why?”

“Maybe my reaction was too strong. But, when you think of all the people in the world, most of them jammed into tiny spaces, someone owning miles and miles of land seems unfair.”

Callahan drained the rest of his ale. “Why?”

“Well... How did you come by all this property?”

“My grandfather’s grandfather, Rufus Callahan, ventured into the Yaak Valley right after the Civil War ended. The Kootenai Indians lived here then, and he traded cattle for land. Started with one hundred and sixty acres.”

“And afterward?”

“His son, Cabe, and my grandfather, Harold, staked a claim for acreage no one else wanted. They cleared the flats for timber and then raised cattle and when the railroad finally came through, there was demand for what they produced. My dad, Henry, converted their success to more land, buying some from the railroad, some from prospectors, and some from the few remaining Kootenai who wanted to move south.”

“And you inherited it all.”

Callahan smiled again. He could see where this was going. “That makes it unfair?”

She met his challenge with an uplifted chin. “Every generation should have an equal chance.”

“I think they do.”

“Someone in the city is probably renting. What’s fair about that?”

“City folk have state-supported education, medical insurance, and access to high-paying jobs. Out here, the average job pays twelve to fourteen thousand a year.”

Callahan cracked the cap on another ale. “A man makes his way by logging, running livestock, maybe a little outfitting – guiding easterners on a big game hunt.”

“So why don’t you move to the city?”

“Who’d want to?”

Her laugh was deep and throaty. “I’ve a feeling this could be a lengthy argument.”

Several seconds of silence passed. He figured the moment was as good as any.
“So, Mel. You in trouble with the law?”

She glanced away, and then at her watch – finally sighed and said, “Would you turn me in if I was?”

“Child abuse, murder, mayhem – you bet.”

Her gaze dropped. “I think it has something to do with my job.”

“What line of work are you in?”

He could see the veil come down. She delayed a moment and her lips tightened.
The next thing she said would be a lie.

“I’m a therapist.”

“Those gents looked like they got more than bad advice.”

“You met them?”

“A passing moment. How long have they been after you?”

“It started yesterday. Someone broke into my house. When I came home they were still there. I escaped but somehow they learned where I was and I’ve been running ever since.” She straightened suddenly. “Which reminds me. I should make a call.”

Callahan shook his head. “No phone.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, ma’am.”

She ran her fingers through her hair and then glanced at her watch again. “It’s after ten. I should be going.”

Despite their first encounter, he did not think she was dangerous. The parties hunting her were unlikely to find and invade his home, even if they thought she was here. He hiked his resolve and plunged ahead. “Well, Mel, I’ve a proposition.”

Her smile grew wide and wicked. “This should be good.”

“It’s an hour and a half to town. Road’s not so good, and hotels might be filled. You might hit a deer in the dark, or end up sleeping in that itty-bitty rig of yours. And you might end up playing hide and seek with your friends all night.”

“Or?”

“I’ve a spare room. A hot bath, and a good night’s sleep. I serve a mean platter of flapjacks when the sun comes up.”

She raised one eyebrow. “No strings?”

“I don’t play that way.”

Her grin faded and she studied him, as if weighing his sincerity. A small reflection of a smile returned and she said, “I’m all yours, hon. I hope you won’t regret it.”

Callahan stirred and stood. “Let me show you the lay of the land.”

He led her to the second floor, past the master bedroom and his son’s domain. The guest bedroom was across the hall from a second bathroom. He flipped on the lights and opened a linen closet to the right of the bath.

“Whirlpool tub!” she exclaimed. “My, oh my.”

“Have a good time.” In the guest bedroom, he swung open the closet doors and drew out a terrycloth robe. “A little big, maybe.”

She folded it over her arm and glanced at the bed. Her gaze shifted to him, a speculative look from the corners of her eyes. “I’m not that fond of sleeping alone.”

It hit him like a shot to the gut. Invitation or test. Either way it was a tad too quick. He lifted a stuffed bear from a nearby chair and handed it to her.

Her brows arched. “Thanks a bunch, Jack.”

Callahan winked and headed for the stairway before he could do or say something stupid.

He cleaned up in the kitchen while the water ran upstairs. When the whirlpool pump kicked on he leaned over the kitchen sink, stared at his reflection in the window and murmured, “Don’t even think about it.”

He doused the lights throughout the house and banked the fire. The whirlpool pump was still running when he started a shower in the master bath and after a while the high pressure, heated spray left him relaxed. He toweled dry, killed the lights in the bath and headed for bed.

Consciousness faded slowly. Memories surfaced and with them a frequent and familiar presence. Laughter, sweet and melodious. Throaty endearments more sensed than heard. Honeysuckle and rose – scents he would never forget. A raven mane flashing in the moonlight by the lake.

Callahan drifted toward a waking state and the sensations strengthened. The soft touch of fingertips on his chest. The warmth of silken limbs enveloping his own. But everything was subtly different. The fragrance of jasmine. Long nails and eager lips. The nails raked his inner thigh and, when she grasped him, his response was immediate.

“The bear was defective,” she whispered. “I’m glad you’re not.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Thursday, May 17th

When Callahan awoke, the sun was not only up, it poured through his bedroom window in a blaze of glory. He rolled his wrist. Nine-twenty. Half the morning already gone. He flipped back the covers and lurched from the bed. Or tried to. His buttocks were sore. His legs ached and his abdominals felt like he had gone ten rounds with an expert.

Callahan sat on the edge of the mattress. Mel was absent, and he figured she had retreated to her own bed after damn near killing him. He felt more than a little guilty and somewhat disappointed. He didn't really know the woman and her style in bed bordered on frenzy. More like a savage workout than the delight-filled encounter he would have preferred.

He showered and dressed. Ten minutes later, he started some eggs and bacon, and a fresh pot of coffee. He turned toward the stairway, intending to wake her when he spotted a folded sheet of paper on the kitchen table.

*Jack,
You're a keeper, but not for me.
Don't be angry, or sad.
ML*

Callahan swept back the curtain at the kitchen window and peered toward the equipment shed. The Porsche was gone. He bent his head in reflection. She was right, of course. Damned attractive, but there was something about her. A brittle core – or some such nonsense. And loving her was like trying to bed a gymnast in the middle of a floor routine.

What the hell. A day in the saddle – or half a day by now – would bring him back to center. Load the trailer with Buck and a mule. Run the fences east toward Mount Henry and trail up to the twin hills overlooking Vinal Creek. Could make it by noon if he got a move on. Plenty of time to take a peek into the fissure. Or, if the fence work delayed him, at least drop the equipment for the next opportunity.

Fence work ruled the day. The storm of the previous week had wreaked havoc with trees on the slopes. Callahan spent five hours pulling toppled conifers clear of the wire. He had not packed the chainsaw and sorely missed it.

During the day, he considered the encounter with Mel Lucero. She seemed driven somehow. Compelled to pack maximum sensation into every moment. An almost frantic search for something he wasn't sure she would ever find. Sex was sex, and she certainly hadn't needed to tie him to the bed, but they had not connected on any level except the physical. It was a ghost of what might have been.

The wind came up around two and by then he had repaired six miles of fence. The animals were tired and sluggish, so he tarped the mountaineering gear near the eastern crest of the twin hills and headed back toward the trailer. At quarter to four, Buck and the mule were loaded. He climbed into the Vaquero, cursing his stiffness and not for the first time.

Callahan carefully backed the trailer and turned downslope. Because of easterly progress during the day, he took a different road home. Ten minutes later, he rolled over

the cattle guard and onto the Bar-C. Only a couple of miles from the east-west right-of-way, he noticed the tracks.

Someone had driven into the trees.

A flash of white amongst wind-whipped spruce and fir caught his eye and Callahan eased on the brakes. After killing the turbine, he stepped down from his rig and backtracked to where the wheel tracks left the roadway. Fifty yards into the forest, he found a vehicle covered with pine bows, a few of which the wind had blown clear.

A white Porsche.

Callahan approached the driver's door and swept away branches piled against the window. She was inside. Head back against the rest. Eyes closed. He knocked on the glass. No response.

The doors were locked.

Under a descending mountain of dread, Callahan returned to the Vaquero and dug through his toolbox until he found a foot-long screwdriver. It took only a few seconds to lever the glass away from its framework. He forced the window downward enough to trip the lock. He knelt and touched her cheek. Cold.

Damnation!

A thin streak of coagulated blood formed a gruesome pathway from behind her ear to beneath her collar. Callahan gently swept her hair back. A small caliber hole, just behind her ear. The burn mark surrounding it indicated the muzzle had been placed against her skin.

He stood, his mind whirling. Cold-blooded execution. Of the woman who had shared his bed less than ten hours before. Sorrow rolled through him - an echo of what had devastated him a decade before. *This could not be possible!* Could it?

Next came anger. What the hell was going on? He knew intuitively she had not brought this on herself. She would not have challenged him with that toy gun had she thought her life was in danger.

Outrage.

Men protected women. They did not harm them. And they certainly did not slay them.

Confusion. What the hell was going on?

The rumble of wheels on gravel was followed by a squeal of brakes. A diesel engine clattered to a stop. A door opened and shut and a familiar voice hollered, “Jack! Where you at?”

“In here, Aubrey.”

The older rancher stepped over the roadside ditch and into the forest. “What you got there, Pardner?”

“I wish I knew.”

A few months past sixty, MacKenna stood almost as tall as Callahan. The big Scot had gained more than a few pounds over the years, requiring his two-inch wide belt to take a substantial southward detour. MacKenna peered over Callahan’s shoulder. He lifted his hat, wiped his balding pate and then ran a fistful of stubby fingers through his beard. “She hurt bad?”

“She’s dead, Aubrey. Someone killed her.”

“The hell you say! Who’d do that to such a pretty little gal?”

He had a clue as to who, but the questions that bothered Callahan were *why* and *what to do about it*. He forced his mind into motion. “I need your help.”

“Name it.”

“Take my cell phone and run south to the junction. Call 911.”

“It will take them *hours* to get up here, Jack.”

“Tell them it’s a homicide. They’ll send a chopper. You can meet them at the flats.”

“What are you going to do, J.C.?”

“Don’t know. Look around a little, maybe.” He turned and dropped a hand on the old rancher’s shoulder. “We haven’t a lot of daylight left, my friend.”

MacKenna dipped his head. “I got a load of firewood on. Be tough going.”

Callahan led his neighbor back to the roadway. He said over his shoulder. “Take my rig. I’ll drop the trailer and you’ll make better time.”

MacKenna climbed into the Vaquero. He rolled down the window and said, “You carrying, amigo?”

When Callahan shook his head, MacKenna passed a Ruger Redhawk over the sill. “Take my forty-four and I’ll see you in an hour or so.”

After the Vaquero was out of earshot, Callahan returned to the Porsche. He sat on a nearby stump and studied her face. In death, she looked reposed, serene. *Why?* That question would have to wait, so he put it aside.

What to do next? Intimately involved fully described the situation and he desperately needed some information. Callahan stood, reached across her and popped the passenger’s lock. After walking around the Porsche and opening the opposite door, he spotted the fake handgun on the floorboard beside her ankle. The glove box was open and empty.

No sign of her purse.

He strode to the rear of the car and swept away the pine bows over the trunk. The license plates were also gone. The VIN number had been pried from the dash.

Callahan returned to the stump. She was supposed to disappear. And if found, remain an enigma even then. *Professionals*. He closed his eyes and replayed the scene at the filling station. A team of four reading a map on the hood of their vehicle. The military gear, the GPS, the concealed weapons. It felt all wrong.

These guys operated in the open – brazen and confident. Arrogant. Like they were above the common man and the laws that governed him.

And what does that imply for me? I made love to her and I'm in this whether I like it or not.

Callahan reached into his rear pocket to fetch his notepad. He spent the next forty minutes focusing on the conversation the previous evening and recording every fact he could remember. There were damn few but he was certain it wasn't going to end here. In the end, he decided Gray-hair would look great centered in crosshairs.

Just before seven, MacKenna returned with County Sheriff Tom Wesson, the coroner and a deputy. Wesson got out first and sauntered over to Callahan. His unhurried manner and disinterested expression gave the impression of nonchalance. Wesson's powers of deduction were legendary but only a few folks knew the Sheriff had spent much of his career in a federal capacity.

The deputy was new. Callahan had not met him before. Wraparound shades, wispy mustache and weak chin. An unmistakable air of resentment in the set of his features. Must have ruined his evening. Too bad. Wesson introduced him as Dave Morrison.

The coroner was, unfortunately, no stranger. The past decade had not been kind to Mitch Springer. He looked shrunken, as if each of the bodies he examined had sucked some of the life out of him. Bulging brown eyes, slicked back black hair and a bobbing

Adam's apple amplified a smarmy quality his worn-shiny suit with frayed cuffs did little to dispel.

The coroner and the deputy helped MacKenna fetch a load of equipment from the back of the Vaquero and all three traipsed into the woods.

Wesson lifted his hat and brushed his fingers through a thinning crewcut. His sun-weathered complexion and faded blue eyes lent an aspect of permanence to a big-boned and rugged frame. He stuck out his hand and shook Callahan's. "Some excitement on the Bar-C, Jack?"

In the shadows beneath the firs, a flash from a camera was followed by several more.

"Not what I'd call it, Tom."

"No plates. Fancy rig, though. Out of state, I'll bet."

Callahan did not reply.

Ten minutes passed before the deputy approached and said, "Car's been stripped, Tom. Corpse has no ID either. We did find this." The deputy held the toy automatic suspended in a plastic bag. "It's an old Beretta someone converted into a squirt gun. Mitch says the cause of death was probably a single .22 caliber bullet in the brain stem."

"Remind him to run a rape kit on her," Wesson replied. His choice of words made Callahan shiver.

Wesson glanced at him with a curious expression but turned to the deputy and added, "When he's done, tag her as Jane Doe and bag her." To Callahan he said, "We'll need to use your rig, J.C."

MacKenna overheard the last comment and said, "I'll hook up and run your animals down to the ranch, Jack."

“Much obliged, Aubrey.” When the rancher turned away to hitch up the horse trailer and the deputy returned to the Porsche, Callahan quietly said to Wesson, “Her name’s Lucero. The vehicle’s registered in California.”

The sheriff only grunted. He reached into his shirt pocket, fetched a toothpick and stuck it between his lips. “Let’s give Dave a hand.”

The deputy zipped shut the bag as they approached. Callahan lifted her by the ankles and led them out to the Vaquero. MacKenna waved and motored away, his ancient Ford bellowing black smoke in protest. Callahan leapt into the driver’s seat and Wesson rode shotgun. The deputy and the coroner climbed in back.

“Where’s the chopper?” Callahan asked.

“On the flat where Vinal Creek dumps into the Yaak,” Wesson replied.

They rode down in silence, for which Callahan was grateful. He didn’t want direct questions just yet and Wesson didn’t seem ready to ask them.

When they reached the Huey, a relic from the Vietnam era, Wesson and his deputy swiftly loaded the body bag and the rest of their gear. The coroner climbed in, the turbine wound up and the rotors began to turn. Wesson clapped the deputy on his shoulder and shouted over the rising whine, “Schedule a wrecker for the car in the morning.” He passed a sheet of paper and added, “Check this out with the California DMV. I’ll be down in a couple of hours if J.C. will give me a lift.”

“No problem,” Callahan replied.

The deputy touched the brim of his hat and boarded the Huey, which soon lifted into the sky and turned south. Wesson and Callahan watched it go before the sheriff softly said, “Hell of a thing.”

“That it is.”

“Let’s drop by your place for a cold one.”

During the ride to the ranch, Wesson asked about John, talked about the weather, and rambled on about how business was going. Unhurried, quiet conversation that was worse than an inquisition from hell. The lawman certainly had the *touch*.

Twenty minutes later, Callahan cracked the caps on two ales and passed one to Wesson. The Sheriff hooked a chair with his boot, straddled it and braced his arms across the back. He drained half his bottle and said, “Good stuff. What d’ya know, Jack?”

“She was on the run and ran out of fuel nearby.”

“You see anyone?”

“Maybe so.” Callahan detailed the encounter in the filling station and then the first episode with Lucero. “She thought I was one of them.”

“Get a plate number?”

“Sorry, no. Wasn’t interested at the time.”

“I’ll ask around. She spend the night?”

“Yessir, she did.”

She sleep alone, Jack?”

Callahan felt the heat clear to his ears. He shook his head.

“You part on good terms?”

He motioned toward the folded note, which still lay on the table – a note written by a vibrant woman who left his bed less than twelve hours before.

Wesson pulled a pencil from his pocket, flipped the sheet open with it and read – a cold and clinical act. “I’ll need this, of course.”

Callahan nodded.

Wesson stood and stretched. “Got any .22 caliber sidearms?”

The implication jolted him. “A Ruger Bearcat. C’mon, Tom!”

“I’ll need that too.”

Tension rippled through him and he stiffened, a protest forming, when the sheriff raised a palm and added, “Keep your britches on, Jack. City cops might be reading you your rights about now. But they don’t know what I know. That doesn’t mean I can afford to ignore possibilities, so get me that Ruger and I’ll eliminate one of them tonight.”

Callahan eased his breath out and headed for the gun cabinet to retrieve the revolver. Another memory surfaced, and when he passed the weapon to Wesson he said, “Talk to Miles.”

“Whitaker?”

“He ran into them at the gas station.”

Wesson grinned. “That’s a break. A witness with an eye for details. Could you do a composite on this gray-haired gent?”

“I’d like to try.”

“Then how about that ride to the city.”

Midnight approached when Callahan returned home. A nightmare of a day, and a night of solitude ahead of him. He started an Enya flashcard and turned the volume up until the windows rattled. Entered the study and booted his PC. When the satellite transmitter linked, he connected to the email server. A short note and a long one from John, which brightened his mood. He answered both and a moment later, a new message downloaded from Whitaker.

Jack, attached is a copy of the story I ran on the unfortunate affair up your way. We’re hoping to find some next of kin. Wesson said the car was registered to Melody Lucero, who had residences in Seattle and Hawaii.

We also ran your composite sketch along with the story. Made the eleven o'clock news in Seattle. Hopefully, something will break.

Wesson called me a few minutes ago to say you need to stop by St. Johns tomorrow. I've no idea why.

Finally, you kept me up all night, damn you. Great story, but two suggestions. Find a better mechanism. Ten years is too long a storyline. Secondly, I like your protagonist and women will love him if you give them the means. Your plot needs a heroine.

Callahan leaned back against the headrest. Now what? St. Johns was the local hospital in Libby. Would they have taken her body there instead of the county morgue? Mel for Melody? Melody Lucero. He liked the way it rolled off his tongue. It was not a name he would soon forget.