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CORNER BOOTH

A short story

by

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The boy and girl made their way up the muddy road as the sun was setting behind misty blue mountains. To their right the sandstone cliffs of the New River Gorge National Park dropped off sharply. Nine hundred feet below them the New River, believed to be the second oldest river in the world and one of the few rivers that flow north, could be heard roaring through the narrow gorge. Usually filled with noisy whitewater rafters and climbers working their moves on the cliffs, the gorge was now so quiet that the screech of a red-tailed hawk could be heard as it circled above. The boy was young and fresh-faced and carried a rolled blanket slung across his back. The girl had a long blonde braid pulled back from her face with a pink and blue ribbon. She giggled nervously as the boy unfurled the blanket and placed it on a grassy point of rock that was still damp from the recent rain. “Are you sure this is safe?” she asked as they settled onto the blanket. The boy pointed to the setting sun. “Look,” he said as he wrapped his arm around her waist. The sun dissolved into brilliant vermilion as it passed behind the mountains and, as twilight settled on the gorge, the fireflies began their dance of love. The young couple relaxed into each other’s arms.

“So, do you like guiding the river?” the girl asked as she leaned toward the boy.

“Uh-huh,” the boy smothered his answer in the girl’s lips. As darkness fell in the West Virginia mountains the boy and girl became one undulating naked body.

“I’ve got to pee,” the girl announced afterward and began fumbling for her shoes.

“Well, take the flashlight and make sure that you walk that way,” he said, pointing behind them. “You don’t want to pee right off the cliff.”

The girl stood up and pointed the light into the trees. “I won’t go far,” she promised and disappeared into the forest. The boy watched as the light bobbed up and down and back and forth, getting smaller and smaller. That’s far enough, he thought, and the light stopped as if obeying his command. “I thought I heard something,” the girl’s voice was muffled by the trees and the distant roar of the river.

“Well, pee and get back here,” shouted the boy. “Gina!” He stood up and shouted again, and was relieved when he heard her reply.

“Hey, it takes more than two seconds to pee!” Just then the boy heard a twig snap, and his body went rigid. A deer, he thought and relaxed. Then he saw a flash of light. A powerful punch threw him backward. The boy sat up on his elbows and took an uncomprehending look at the red stain blossoming on his chest. A second flash of light slammed the boy’s head into the ground. The shooter walked over to the boy and nudged him with his foot. Slinging his rifle over his shoulder, he dragged the lifeless body over to the edge of the cliff. With a forceful grunt, the shooter pushed the boy until he rolled out of sight toward the river far below.

Satisfied with himself, he turned and looked at the light wavering in the trees just a few hundred feet away. The light quivered then blinked off. The shooter started running down the hill.

Oh god! the girl thought. As soon as the shooter turned his attention to her, she had fumbled the flashlight off and crashed through the rhododendron. She didn't realize that her naked body, white against the black of the forest, presented a perfect target. The girl turned left vaguely aware that she would find either the road or the sheer drop off the cliff. She could hear the shooter as he gave chase. Without warning, the girl pitched forward over a bank and realized that she was on the road. She didn't dare turn around to look behind her. The road was rutted, covered with rocks and she couldn't afford to fall. *The car*, she thought, remembering the boy's Jeep parked at the road's entrance.

The shooter was gaining on the girl and deliberately slowed his pace. *This is more like it*, he thought. He loved a good hunt. He jogged down the old mountain road keeping the girl's pale body in view. He saw her toss the flashlight and made a mental note to go back later to look for it and retrieve the blanket. It wouldn't do to have anything lying around after this night. The shooter knew that the girl would have to turn back toward him when the road made a switchback, and he scrambled down the embankment that would intersect with the girl's path. With his large black form hidden in the trees, he heard the girl crashing through the brush near the switchback. *Damn*, he thought, *the bitch is heading straight for the main road.*

The girl could see the outline of the white Jeep below her and, ignoring the turn in the road, she began sliding down the muddy bank. For a second-but only a second--she thought she would make it. *Keys!* The girl slammed into the Jeep and began wrestling with the door handle. *Locked!* She ran to the driver's side of the Jeep, pulled open the door, and dove inside. As she locked the door, she could see the hulking figure running to the Jeep. *Oh God*, she thought, *keys--keys!* In the half-light she ran her hands along the steering column searching for the ignition

switch. But when she found it, there were no dangling keys. A shadow moved in front of the window, turning half-light into darkness. The girl turned to see the shooter's large head leering at her.

“Come on out, girlie,” he said. “I ain't gonna hurt ya.”

The girl shoved her hand under the floor mat and pulled out a rabbit's foot key chain. She managed to try one key in the ignition but then dropped them on the floor. When the shooter saw what she was doing, his lopsided grin turned into a scowl.

“Whoa, girlie, you ain't goin' nowhere.” He began banging on the window glass with the butt of his rifle. The girl lowered her head to look for the keys just as the rifle butt pierced the glass. Thousands of hairline cracks formed on the window. She looked up and saw the window collapse around the shooter's hand as his fist punched through the shattered glass. With one motion he grabbed the girl's long blonde braid and pulled her face up to his. “I told ya, girlie . . . you ain't goin' nowhere.”

Bonnie Franca sat hidden in the shadows of the corner booth at the Route 19 Bar and Grill, dubbed “Smiley's” by the river crowd. At the bar a myriad of river rats and rock climbers drank beer, played darts, and bragged about their latest adventures in The Gorge. Bonnie didn't bother to listen--she had heard it all before. It was pleasant, as pleasant as it could get in the Route 19 Bar and Grill, to be hidden in the shadowed corner nursing her beer and ignoring the staccato conversations and occasional outbursts of laughter coming from the floor. From her

booth she could observe without being observed, and that suited Bonnie just fine. The men, suntanned muscles gleaming in the dim lighting, outnumbered the women five to one--the normal ratio for most edge sports. The smoky bar was large enough for them to divide up into two groups: the raft guides at the dartboard, and the rock climbers at the bar, separated only by a few feet but mentally miles apart. Such braggarts, thought Bonnie. Who are they trying to impress except each other? Bonnie smiled as Dwight took up his position at the dartboard. Years ago, when Bonnie had decided to work as a raft guide, Dwight had arrived for guide training in a vintage Porsche, sporting a complete ensemble of river gear fresh off the store's shelves. The other trainees looked like plump little bumblebees in their company-supplied orange and black lifejackets. Bonnie was another exception with her worn hand-me-downs. Instead of feeling out of place, however, Dwight seemed to assume that he was better than the rest of the hopefuls. At least, that's how Bonnie saw it. She remembered the first time they had soloed during raft training. It was the day she had met Kelly . . . and skunked Dwight.

She could remember all the details: the high, muddy river, Dwight's squeaky-clean confidence, the anxiety she felt about going down the river without an instructor on board. There had been only a few guide positions open that season and, when she met her assigned crew, Bonnie didn't think they had a chance. Kelly was small, and her brothers were so . . . young. The four of them were dwarfed by Dwight's crew in both size and strength, but when Kelly told Bonnie that she had been working on the Colorado a daring plan surfaced. If Dwight's boat flipped—well, it was their only chance. When they had entered Greyhound Rapid, a recirculating hydraulic that could “stop a Greyhound bus,” Bonnie and Kelly chose to take the suicide route. Paddling furiously, they had barely made it across the drop and a large back-

roiling wave. A twinge of delight tickled Bonnie as she remembered the thrill of making it across Greyhound. Then she had seen Dwight take the centerline and drop straight into the hydraulic. Bonnie looked just in time to see the bottom of the raft and small, bobbing helmets appear and disappear as the men were circulated repeatedly and ejected down river. It took all their strength to paddle and pick up Dwight and his men. When they reached the shoreline everyone was physically spent and, for a long while, all they could do was breathe. Dwight had summed it all up with a simple “thanks.” In spite of the sweet taste of that victory and the ego massage she had enjoyed thereafter, Bonnie still avoided being friends with Dwight.

Dapper as always, she thought this night as she examined his clean cotton tee-shirt, the required Patagonia baggy shorts, polished off with Teva sandaled feet. Compared to the other raft guides in their wrinkled and dirty clothes, Dwight looked like he had just stepped out of a catalogue. Hidden in her corner booth she could observe Dwight and the others like a spy. Just last year she would have been right up there with either group. Not as a hanger-on, as so many of the bar women were, but as a river guide for the money and a rock climber for the pleasure. That seemed like centuries ago. She drained the last drop of beer from her glass. Born a mountain girl, she had returned after college and a short, sour taste of city life when she had inherited her grandparent’s small farm near the New River Gorge. Now she was a respectable working woman. With her empty glass she toasted her new career as a reporter for the *Beckley Herald*. No more job-hopping to keep the scalawags from getting her property. She sat the glass down hard enough for the barmaid to take notice.

“Can I get ya another one?” The waitress loomed above Bonnie, a dark silhouette with teased hair that formed a halo around her head. “We got plenty more where that came from,

honey,” the barmaid said, pushing for an answer. Bonnie just pointed to her empty glass and nodded. She was straining now to eavesdrop on Dwight. He was leaning against the bar in an intense conversation with another raft guide that Bonnie didn’t recognize. Dwight’s voice would rise and fall, punctuated by his finger jabbing holes in the smoky air. When he mentioned the name of Jake McCoy his voice would rise just high enough that the people around him could hear. Bonnie shrank back even farther in the booth listening to Dwight’s soft voice with the West Virginia drawl.

“So I said to Jake . . . Jake McCoy, you’re goin’ to have a run-in with the law some day.”

“It’ll be some murderous husband,” contributed the barmaid who, because of her important position as the purveyor of alcohol, felt like every conversation in the bar included her. Dwight lowered his voice. “Where Jake gets his money is a puzzle lots of people would like to solve.”

“There’s lots of ideas ’bout it floatin’ around,” offered the river guide who chuckled at his own pun.

Bonnie tried to hang onto the conversation, but her mind kept going back to the barmaid’s remark about the murderous husband. Over the years Bonnie and Jake had developed a relationship, at least to Bonnie it was a relationship. They weren’t saying the “M” word or anything like that, but they had certainly progressed to the point of exclusive dating.

“Around here people either work in the mines or they inherit their wealth,” Dwight simplified. He was one of the latter. “Jake ain’t done either one.”

Bonnie knew that Dwight had money, and that he liked people with money. And now he was talking about Jake and money. Bonnie began to focus on the conversation. Jake and money

always led to interesting speculation. Jake had moved to the New River Gorge ten years ago when he inherited his uncle's property which included a house, fifty acres, and an abandoned coal mine that had enriched many a McCoy, but not Jake McCoy. Yet he always seemed to have plenty of money and no real job to merit it. Oh, he had worked the usual jobs as a river guide, and a stint leading fresh-faced teens on climbing trips up the numerous rock crags that lined the gorge. Neither could be considered a lucrative career. Bonnie had wondered many times where he got the money he so lavishly spent on her, but after dinner and wine and sitting in front of the old fireplace in his house, she didn't care anymore. She preferred not to know because to think of it made her feel queer inside and a little guilty, though she wasn't sure why. Now Dwight's conversation had brought the subject up and in a way that she couldn't ignore. Dwight's voice was drowned out by Willie Nelson wailing from the corner jukebox, so Bonnie turned her thoughts to the river once more. She had met Jake that same eventful day after rescuing Dwight and his brawny crew. Bonnie had pulled into the nearest eddy and they all watched a kayak slip effortlessly in and out of the waves and slide right past Greyhound. Bonnie was mesmerized by the kayak's graceful dance and longed to be in the little red boat riding the river like you ride a horse. Then Jake dove his kayak into the eddy and flashed her his famous smile. "Hi there, lonesome, I'm Jake McCoy!" Bonnie smiled remembering his brash introduction. His flashing smile had caught her off-guard, and she could only mumble something about not being lonely. He had called her "sweet-cheeks", sliced his boat across the eddy-line and disappeared down river, his paddles rising and dipping like a windmill.

Another song followed--Garth Brooks--and Bonnie turned her attention to the window beside her. She could hear the crunch of the gravel as tires pulled into the parking spots in front

of Smiley's. Sunlight filtered through the blinds making a striped pattern across her table and then disappeared into a gloom of dark and sinister clouds. Within minutes the clouds opened to deliver a torrent of rain on the people straggling, now running, into the bar. Bonnie noticed another car, a black Mercedes shiny in the rain, and a couple huddled under a trench coat raced for the door. Bonnie was studying the Mercedes when the couple entered the bar, and she was not surprised to see Jake McCoy peering out from the coat. But when she saw the brunette beauty on his arm Bonnie's heart plummeted and she sank further into the dim corner of her booth. Jake ordered drinks as the brunette sat down and Dwight crossed the small space to greet Jake with a slap on the back. After a few initial words together, Jake led Dwight to the opposite corner to talk, leaving the brunette seated at the bar for Bonnie to stare at. She was very pretty with long hair tucked casually behind one ear. She was tall, much taller than Bonnie's small frame, and she draped herself comfortably on the barstool, crossing her willowy legs and adjusting the split in her skirt. *Well*, thought Bonnie, choking back tears, *she's certainly no river rat*. The brunette reached into a miniature beaded purse, pulled out a silver cigarette case, and lit a long, thin cigarette. The smoke rose in the lights over the bar making a wispy line of blue-white tethering her to the white, smoky ceiling.

"Caroline," Jake called as he motioned for her to join them.

Well, now she knew her name. When Caroline seated herself in the far corner with Jake and Dwight, Bonnie saw her chance to escape unnoticed. Leaving a tip on the table, she pulled on her hooded anorak and walked out into the rain. She ran to her old blue Karman Ghia with the traditional dented nose, but was soaked to the bone by the time she made it into the driver's seat. Bonnie looked at her reflection in the rear view mirror. Her hair was plastered to her head and

tiny rivulets of water rolled down her face. *Damn!* Then she looked up and saw Dwight watching her from the window. It was all she could do to keep from crying. She jammed her keys into the ignition, and the car jumped forward and stalled. Bonnie couldn't avoid looking in the window to see Dwight's teeth flashing white in a wide grin. Pushing the stick into reverse, she kept her foot on the clutch as the old car whined into action. Backing out she saw Dwight make a Model T cranking motion with his arm.

Turning left on Route 19 Bonnie headed across the New River Bridge, the longest steel arch span in the world and, at 876 feet above the New River, the highest east of the Mississippi. On the third Saturday in October skydivers descended on the area to jump off the bridge. It was the biggest BASE sight in the world. Bridge Day was the only day BASE jumping was legal, although Bonnie knew people who had risked clashing with park rangers and railroad officials to jump off the bridge at other times. Almost all of them jumped at night and most of them got caught. Bonnie recalled when Dwight had bragged to the assembled faithful at Smiley's that he was going to do it, but he never did. Thinking of Dwight made her think of Jake, and she turned past the Visitors' Center, following the narrow, winding road that led down to the river and the climbing crags. A sharp left turn and she was on the ribbon of road that led to Endless Wall, a four and a half-mile stretch of West Virginia sandstone that attracted climbers from around the globe. Without thinking, Bonnie turned onto the gravel road that led to Jake's house. It's just habit, she thought by way of an excuse, but she didn't turn around when she reached the top of the road. Instead she backed the little car into the trees and out of sight. Although the rain had stopped and the setting sun was peeping through the clouds, the forest surrounding the old McCoy home gave the setting a dark and eerie feel, and the house, constructed of log and stone,

was dark as well. Bonnie skirted the house and walked through dripping trees to a point of rock that looked out over the Gorge. Sitting on the damp boulders, she stared at the house allowing tears to flow. *Oh, Jake, you're such a rat!* She wondered how she had ever become so infatuated with him? But she knew how. It was seared into her mind as if it were yesterday.

The night after Jake had made his smiling debut on the river she had recognized him at Smiley's. He was throwing darts with a girl hanging on his arm, but when he saw her he flashed her a smile of recognition. She looked away. She did note, however, that he was handsome and had an engaging smile that made you want to smile back.

Bonnie, suppressing her own smile, found a booth in the corner and ordered a beer. When the beer arrived Jake was carrying it. He gave her a white-toothed grin before sliding onto the bench beside her.

"I knew you were a lonesome gal the first time I saw you."

"Oh yeah? What makes you think so?" Bonnie shot back, feeling her face start to burn.

"Female raft guides are either married, hooked-up, or lonely," Jake said flatly, slamming his beer down so hard the foam rolled over the sides of the glass. Bonnie wondered if he was watching her face turn red.

"I want to learn to kayak," was all she managed to say. Jake's grin broke into a laugh but, noting Bonnie's expression, it faded back into a grin.

"What is it? You think I can teach you to kayak? I don't give lessons."

"Well, Mr. Jake McCoy," Bonnie said with the sweetest southern drawl she could muster, "I'm not interested in anything else you have to offer."

“We’ll see about that.” Jake was still smiling as he rose to go. He had walked about two steps when he turned back to Bonnie. The plaster smile had melted. “If you want . . . you can borrow my boat.” He scribbled something on a napkin and handed it to Bonnie. “I don’t use the boat on Wednesdays.”

“But . . . today is Wednesday.”

“I work on Wednesday, but today I was off.” Jake looked toward the catcalls coming from the bar. “Well, sweet-cheeks, give me a call,” he said in a raised voice. She looked at the napkin. In black marker was written a phone number. She could not think of a witty comeback, and was thankful when Jake had taken his place at the dartboard.

Bonnie was walking along the rim of the gorge now. Heavy clouds loomed deep purple above the sunset and the river whispered its distant roar. In her preoccupation with Jake she had wandered far from the house. Turning into the premature twilight of the forest she made her way back to her car. A thick stand of rhododendron blocked her progress. Bonnie walked uphill until she found a break in the bushes and, once on the other side, she had to cross a wide ditch still flowing water from the recent downpour. That’s when she noticed it. Caught in a tiny pool created by miniature boulders a syringe gleamed white against an ochre background. Bonnie stared at the object so out of place in the natural setting. Carefully she picked it up with her bandana and examined it. The sharp point was missing, but it was definitely a medical syringe. Bonnie knew that Jake didn’t do drugs, but she wasn’t so sure about any of his hangers-on. She stuffed the bandana into her pocket and looked up the path that led to the old McCoy mine. She walked uphill--her eyes focused on the gully. The forest had become so quiet . . . as if every creature were holding its breath. Then she heard voices in the distance. Bonnie froze. To her left

she imagined a shadow form. The silence was jarred by a heavy sound--metal sliding--and the familiar clink that reminded her of her father's bolt action rifle. Or maybe it was just--Bonnie stood perfectly still . . . listening. A girlish peal of laughter floated down the hill, then the rustle of wet leaves--closer now. No creature breathed. Feeling a little foolish, but scared, Bonnie ran to her car and didn't stop running until she drove across the bridge to Fayetteville.

Once inside the town limits Bonnie relaxed her death-grip on the steering wheel and pulled into the Stop 'n Go to buy a bottle of Merlot. The glove compartment yielded a corkscrew and a plastic cup. She drank the cup of Merlot and corked the bottle. *Drinking alone is not good for you*, she thought, so she drove up a steep gravel road that led to Kelly's tiny cinderblock house, dubbed Das Bunker for its square, spartan appearance. A soft mist rose up from the long grass surrounding the house. Several cars, carelessly parked, seemed to grow out of the tall fescue. Bonnie had expected to find Kelly alone but, looking into the warm glow of the open door, she could see people gathered inside. Her first thought was that Kelly was having a party and she was not included, but before she could nurse one more wound, she noticed that the gathering seemed solemn--not at all the usual demeanor of whitewater guides. Bonnie entered the open screen door with her cup in one hand and the bottle of Merlot in the other. She smiled at Kelly sitting on the sofa, but Kelly did not return the greeting, so she quietly curled up in an empty chair. Bonnie and Kelly had developed a close relationship when they guided together for several summers on the New River. Then Bonnie had returned to school, and Kelly had risen from outstanding guide to manager of WestvirginiaWhiteWater, and they had drifted apart. Still, they were friends, and Kelly had pulled her through some difficult times in the past, so it seemed natural to assume that she still had crying privileges at Das Bunker. One of the river guides, a tall

thin kid with red hair and freckles, surveyed the faces around him. “So, what are we going to do?” he asked no one in particular.

“I agree with Kelly that we ought to wait till tomorrow morning,” Mat said. Kelly’s brothers stood in the background behind their older sister. Bonnie was consumed by her own thoughts. Whatever guide thing they were hashing out, she wasn’t interested. She had much more pressing things on her mind--namely Jake McCoy’s cheating heart. Bonnie just wished these people would leave and let her have the privacy she needed.

“I still think we ought to call the police,” someone said.

“I don’t think the police will get involved unless someone’s been missing longer than twenty four hours,” Mat replied.

Bonnie perked up. “Who’s missing?” she asked Kelly.

“One of our first-year guides took off this morning with a customer named Gina and they haven’t returned. Gina’s sister is rather . . . upset. No one knows exactly where they went, but we assume they headed up to Beauty Mountain or somewhere like that to do a little necking.

“Look,” said Kelly, taking control of the conversation, “Buddy’s on schedule to work the nine o’clock trip tomorrow. If they’re not back by morning, I’ll call the police. Mat, you report this to the missing girl’s sister tonight. Now--everyone go home.”

The room cleared with Kelly’s command. Bonnie waited until the last car left and then whistled through her teeth. “Looks like someone’s getting fired tomorrow,” she said.

“I hope that’s all there is to it.”

“You don’t actually think they could be lost, do you? Or run off together? Come on. Those two kids are in the woods necking as we speak.”

“I hope that’s all there is to it,” Kelly repeated.

Bonnie thought hard. “Well, what the hell do you think could have happened to them? And if you think something has happened, why don’t you call the police now?”

“I’m not getting the police involved unless I absolutely have to. It wouldn’t do WWW any good to have two summers in a row of bad publicity,” Kelly said, referring to the customer death the previous summer.

“The guy had a heart attack, Kel. You can’t be blamed for that.”

“All these customers put their safety in my hands,” Kelly reminded Bonnie as she picked up the bottle of Merlot. Kelly poured herself a tall glass of wine and took a long drink. “What brought you to my doorstep tonight?”

For a fleeting moment Bonnie thought it wouldn’t be fair to unburden herself to Kelly.

“How come you’re not with Mr. McCoy tonight?”

That did it! “He’s with Car-o-line.”

“Who’s that? I thought you guys were pretty solid.”

“Well, ‘solid’ is not the way I would describe it. We’re dating hot and heavy for a few months, and then he disappears for weeks at a time.”

“Disappears to where?”

“Who knows? I never asked . . . I guess now I know.” Bonnie let out a long sigh.

“I always said he would break your heart.” Kelly was too tired to choose her words carefully. “You know he’s got a reputation for womanizing, and remember the rumors several years ago that he was growing dope on that mountain of his.”

“Oh, I never believed that,” Bonnie said, then remembered what was in her pocket.

“Maybe some of those teenagers that hang around up there . . . or . . . what about Dwight? He’s up there a lot.” Bonnie stopped, realizing that she had been thinking aloud.

Kelly looked at Bonnie and said in a level voice, “You never did get to know Dwight. You made up your mind that first year we were all together that he was a turn-off, and you never gave him the time of day. I’d pick Dwight over Jake any day.”

Bonnie ignored Kelly’s tack in that direction. “You think those rumors are true, don’t you? What insight do you have that I don’t?”

“First--where does he get his money? Second--I never did trust him.”

“Why not?” Bonnie asked. “Do you know something I don’t?”

“I know nothing,” Kelly said. “I’m making assumptions about Jake, just like you are about Dwight. But if I had to choose between the two . . .” Kelly whistled softly under her breath. “Think about it.”

That night Bonnie lay awake on Kelly’s sofa as her mind juggled fragmented thoughts of Jake and Dwight and syringes and missing kids. Finally, to put herself to sleep, she pushed her mind back to the time she had backed Kelly’s truck into a black Mercedes and Jake McCoy had stepped out of the car. Bonnie could see him in the rear view mirror studying the fender of the Mercedes. She had pulled her head back into the safety of the truck to compose her thoughts, but it was too late. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Jake shouted as he pushed his face into the truck window. The scowl melted into a grin when he saw her. “Well, if it isn’t sweet-cheeks . . . why didn’t you call me?”

“I don’t call boys,” Bonnie said, her eyes level with his. She longed to ram the gas pedal to the floor and get lost on the road. Instead she said, “my insurance company will pay,” and eased down on the gas pedal. She drove a few feet with Jake’s hand on the car door as he walked beside. “Can I help you?” she asked.

“You can’t leave me stranded here.”

“It’s a dented fender!”

“Yes . . . I need a tow truck. Could you give me a lift into town?”

“It’s a den-ted fen-der.” Bonnie pronounced each word distinctly.

“But . . . it’s a Mer-ce-des!” Jake smiled as he stared into Bonnie’s eyes. She felt her stomach tighten just like it did when she dropped into a big rapid.

“Get in,” she said, unlocking the passenger door and feeling like she was sliding down the rapid sideways. The ride into town had turned into lunch at Smiley’s and that had turned into games of pool and darts, followed by dinner and sweet conversation in the shadows of the corner booth. Smiling at her memories, Bonnie snuggled under the covers, comfortably in love with Jake again.

The next morning Bonnie awoke to the sound of jangling keys. She opened one eye and saw Dwight digging through Kelly’s desk drawer. *Damn*, she thought. She quickly shut her eye. Too late.

“Sorry to wake you,” Dwight said, “but Ron called in sick, and I need the keys to the video cabinet . . . gotta run the kayak-video on the second trip.”

“What time is it?” Bonnie asked, not bothering to open her eye again.

“Its 6:45 . . . get up . . . Kelly needs you to guide.”

Bonnie groaned. “Any sign of those missing kids?”

“Buddy hasn’t shown up yet, if that’s what you mean.”

Bonnie studied Dwight as he continued to rummage through the drawer. He looked as fresh as the new morning. She watched his muscles make the little blonde hairs on his legs dance in the early morning sunlight. Slowly his answer started to register in her foggy brain as she sat up on the sofa. Her head throbbed and her mouth had grown a coat of fur overnight. She retrieved her toothbrush and a change of clothing from her car, and stood in the doorway of Kelly’s house brushing her teeth as she looked out at the mountains marching off into the distance. She knew she should guide for Kelly, but the secret in her pocket was burning a hole in her mind. Bonnie was driven by one thought: she wanted to go back to McCoy Hill and search the gully in the daylight.

Dwight, having found the keys, walked to his Isuzu Rodeo, another of his vehicle collection. “See ya at WWW.”

“Wait!” Bonnie cried. “I . . . I can’t guide today . . . I . . . there’s something I’ve got to do. Have Kelly call Jake. He’ll guide for her.” What a brilliant idea!

Dwight regarded Bonnie with steel-gray eyes. “Must be really important to give Kelly the shaft.”

Bonnie started to say something then clamped her mouth shut. She wondered what Dwight would say if he knew what she had found. His reaction could be very telling. Impulsively, she decided to show the syringe to Dwight and explain her plan.

“I found this last night . . . near Jake’s house,” she said as she pulled out the bandana. When she unveiled her booty Bonnie watched Dwight closely.

“What the hell?” His sleepy-morning eyes popped open when he saw the syringe.

“Exactly where did you find this?”

“It was in the gully that parallels the trail from the house to the mine. What do you know about it? I know Jake doesn’t do drugs.” Dwight looked at Bonnie with an intensity that stripped away all her secrets. “Well,” she continued weakly, “he doesn’t do these kind of drugs. Anyway, I want to see what else I can find. I want to go back to Jake’s . . . you can get him on the river. Maybe in the daylight . . .” Bonnie stopped, not wanting to confess her run from the boogiemán.

Dwight ran his fingers through his blonde hair and breathed a loud sigh. “I don’t want you to go up there.” He started to put his hand on her shoulder, thought better of it, and dropped it to his side. “I don’t think it’s safe. Jake’s got something going on up there . . . I don’t know what. but I’ve got a bad feeling about it.” Dwight studied Bonnie who was doing some mental maneuvering of her own. “Look, I know you like Jake and y’all date and all, but . . .” Bonnie looked at Dwight. This conversation was going in a direction she hadn’t anticipated. “Look . . . are you determined to do this?” Bonnie just stared at him nodding. “Because if you are then I’ll get Jake off that hill and on the river . . . one condition . . . keep your cell phone with you and turned on at all times. Okay?”

Bonnie nodded again, puzzled by this demonstration of protectiveness from Dwight, of all people.

“What’s your cell phone number?” Dwight asked as he pulled paper and pencil out of his truck. Bonnie gave him the number and Dwight drove off, his “Be careful!” hanging in the air. Now what? Home was thirty minutes away. Bonnie opted to go to WWW and face Kelly while

she waited for the second trip, the nine o'clock trip that Jake and Dwight would be on, to leave for the river.

The rafting company was a flurry of activity. Customers and river guides were everywhere, and big green buses with the familiar blue standing waves painted to make the WWW logo crowded the parking lot. Bonnie checked the river schedule tacked to the office door. The missing guide, Bud, was scheduled to guide for the nine o'clock trip. She looked at her watch--eight thirty. He should be here by now. Inside the office Kelly was on the phone, customers were milling around, and the girls behind the counter looked busy. Bonnie noticed a young girl with long blonde hair pulled back in a braid sitting beside the Pepsi machine. Her eyes were swollen and she looked as if she hadn't slept all night. Bonnie extended her hand in greeting, introducing herself. The girl's name was Kate. Bonnie guessed correctly that she was the missing girl's sister. Kelly's eyes fell on Bonnie as she hung up the phone. "I'm in a real jam here, Bonnie. Why wouldn't you guide for me?"

"Kelly, I'd do anything for you, but . . . not today. I . . . I'll explain later," Bonnie said as she watched Kelly's face drop. Then she leaned over the counter. "Is there anything else that I can do?"

Kelly glanced at Kate. "Yeah," she said. "I've called the police and they should be here any minute. Can you stick with Kate? She'll have to talk to them. Help her out in any way you can."

Bonnie guided Kate out onto the porch where they sat down. Within minutes a police cruiser pulled up to the office and Bonnie could feel the girl tighten beside her. She recognized

Officer Mulhoney as he stepped out of the car. He had taken a CPR refresher course that Bonnie had taught at the local fire station a few months back.

“Jim,” she said, shaking his hand. “Kelly is tied up at the moment, but if you’re here on the missing persons report, I can help you. This is Kate, the missing girl’s sister.”

Jim Mulhoney took Bonnie’s place and began talking to Kate. Bonnie drifted away and leaned against the locust post that supported the porch roof. Closing her eyes, she listened to everyone getting ready for a day on the river when she heard a pair of familiar voices. She opened her eyes to see Jake and Dwight walking past her. She wanted to dart out of sight, but it was too late. Bonnie steeled herself to greet Jake, but the men, their faces drawn and their eyes down, walked by her. As Bonnie puzzled over this, Kelly came out to greet the officer. Bonnie watched as Jake and Dwight made their way through the crowd of eager rafters lining up for the nine o’clock trip.

A squelch came over the police radio, and Jim Mulhoney answered it. “Well,” he said, “they’ve found the Jeep . . . half in, half out of the river at the bottom of Pine Ridge. There’s no sign of the boy or the girl. My men are down there now, and that’s where I’m headed.” He tipped his hat to the women. “Y’all stay here. I’ll be back soon.”

Kelly held Kate, who dissolved into tears, and watched the police car pull away. Bonnie walked over and locked eyes with Kelly. Pine Ridge! Jake’s property. Bonnie grew anxious for the trip to leave. When the bus packed with excited rafters finally passed the office she noticed Dwight, not Jake, looking at her through the bus window. Then Kelly took Kate into the office, allowing the door to slam in Bonnie’s face. Bonnie desperately wanted to go to Kelly, confess

all, and bandage the wounded friendship. Instead she coaxed the Karman Ghia alive once more and drove across the bridge to Jake's house.

McCoy Hill presented a different picture in the daylight. Songbirds brought the forest to life and the dappled sunlight that filtered through the trees created a golden path to the old house. Bonnie trudged up the hill to the mine path. She would know when she reached the spot where she found the syringe by the large stand of rhododendron. She found the miniature pool which had dried with a clear imprint of where she had swiped up the syringe with her bandana. Bonnie's eyes scanned the ditch. Raising her head to look up the hill something caught her attention. The pink stood out so much against the muted greens and browns of the late summer forest, that Bonnie wondered why she hadn't seen the ribbon sooner. She pulled it out of the tree gingerly, slipping her finger through the loop, and held it up to the sunlight. Such odd things--a syringe and a pink and blue hair ribbon. Bonnie thought of Car-o-line and, suppressing a surge of anger, shrugged and put the ribbon in her pocket. There was still time to explore, so she began her ascent up the ridge. She had covered a good distance before she stopped to rest. For a few moments all she could hear was her own breathing. She closed her eyes and soaked up the sounds of the forest: the murmur of the river far below, the rustle of the leaves, the snap of a twig--Bonnie's eyes popped open. A shadow had passed over the sun, and the woods once more had eyes. She jumped as a tinny "Ode to Joy" from her cell phone exploded the air. It was Dwight.

"If you're at McCoy House--get out of there! NOW!"

Bonnie didn't need to answer. The snapping twig had become heavy footfalls, and she turned and ran down the trail. She didn't want to fall in the slippery mud, but she was more

afraid of slowing down. Just when she thought her legs would give out she saw the house. When she reached her car, Bonnie looked uphill and saw something vanish into the trees. *Please start*, she prayed as the engine gave a sluggish crank. She released the key and glanced again into the woods. When she turned the key again the car responded with a welcome whir. By the time she reached the New River Bridge she had gained enough composure to check her mach meter and slow the Ghia down to its normal driving speed. But Bonnie's mind continued to race. What had chased her down the hill? Or had anything chased her down the hill? She had heard and seen something in the trees, or had she? And why Dwight's frantic call? By the time she reached WWW Bonnie had calmed down, but when she saw Kelly her emotions took another turn.

Kelly's expression was twisted in a grimace. She sat down hard in the chair and put her face in her hands. "This just keeps getting worse and worse," she said, shaking her head.

"Dwight just called. Seems that Jake spotted Bud . . . his body, I mean."

Bonnie gasped. "Oh, no! Where?"

"He was halfway down the cliff at Pine Ridge. Jake spotted it from the river as the trip was passing by."

"And the girl? Did they fall?"

"We don't know enough at this point, except that Gina is still missing." They were walking the road to the upper campground where Kate and her mother were waiting for news.

"Well, it's obvious what happened," Bonnie said. "They fell off the cliff."

"It certainly appears that way. But how did the Jeep get into the river?"

"Stolen and dumped?"

“Well, now we just have to find Gina and hope that she tried to hike out and got herself lost . . . easy to do in these mountains.” Kelly brushed away a tear and straightened her back as they approached Kate’s little red tent. Bonnie hung back and let Kelly break the news to the two women. She watched Kelly talk to them, answering their questions, trying to give them hope for Gina’s safe return. Bonnie admired Kelly’s ability to empathize with total strangers as she had admired her strengths on the river. Suddenly, Kelly’s pager beeped a 911, announcing the end of the visit.

“We’ll be back again as soon as we hear anything new, Mrs. Sanders.” Kelly said as she passed out comforting hugs before heading back to the office.

The parking area was a nest of activity as wet, happy rafters returned from the river. Just as Kelly and Bonnie started up the office steps Carla, the trip leader for that morning’s eight o’clock trip, stepped out the door. “The nine o’clock is going to be late,” she announced to Kelly.

“I would expect so,” Kelly said. “They had to wait for the police to show up. They ought to be heading back about now.”

“No . . . I mean . . . the police won’t let them leave.”

“ANY of them? I can see them keeping Jake, but the whole trip full of tourists? If they don’t start off that river now they’ll be paddling in the dark. Nancy, get me the police . . . we’re going to have a mind meld.” The door slammed behind Kelly, and Bonnie was alone. All she could do now was wait for Dwight and Jake to return. Bonnie sat on the porch steps nursing her last thought. Dwight and Jake . . . not Jake and Dwight. Well, who wouldn’t be confused after a day like today, she reasoned? Then she turned her thoughts to poor Danny and the missing girl, thought a silent prayer and began her vigil.

The second trip returned full of tired and puzzled rafters still wondering why a raft guide and the video man bailed out of the trip before the final rapid. It had turned into night by the time Dwight and Jake returned in the police car. Officer Mulhoney dropped them off at the office, and Kelly slipped into the patrol car to have some privacy as she questioned Jim. Bonnie watched her drop her head into her hands and felt a sympathetic pang of agony. A tearful Kelly thanked Jim and they grimly watched as he drove away.

“Well, I guess your Mr. McCoy is some kind of hero . . . spotting Buddy like that.”

Bonnie didn't respond. Instead she stared at Kate who had walked over and sat on the porch steps. Her hair was pulled back from her face in a long braid tied with a pink and blue ribbon.

“How old is your sister?” Bonnie asked Kate.

“Eighteen . . . same as me . . . we're twins. Why?”

“Do you dress alike?”

“Sometimes . . . why?”

Bonnie looked at Kelly and started to say something but at that moment Jake and Dwight entered the porch circle of light. Both had just showered and Bonnie couldn't help but notice that Jake smelled of Old Spice. Bonnie locked eyes with Kelly and head-gestured toward Smiley's, a short walk away. Before leaving, Kelly hugged Kate, sending her back to Mrs. Saunders with hopeful comments. “Now let's get dinner,” she said.

As they walked to Smiley's and squeezed into the corner booth Jake tried to bask in the glow of his fifteen minutes for finding Buddy. He didn't seem to notice the grim expressions on the faces of his three companions, but when Bonnie waved the barmaid away it got Jake's

attention. Without a word, Bonnie reached into her pocket and produced a yellow bandana, unfolding it to reveal the syringe. “What’s this, Jake?”

“Wow, Bonnie . . . you shooting up?”

Bonnie tightened her lips. “I saw you with Caroline and . . . I don’t know why but I went up to your house.” Jake started to say something. Bonnie hushed him with a look. “That’s where I found the syringe . . . and this.” Bonnie reached into her pocket and produced the satin ribbon. Jake guffawed, but Kelly’s eyes widened and darted to Bonnie.

“So some flunky at my place had some illegal--what the hell does a ribbon have to do with anything?”

“The missing girl,” Kelly jumped in. “She has a twin sister . . . who happens to be wearing a pink and blue ribbon.”

Dwight watched Jake’s face crumple and seized the moment. “Jake, what the hell is happening on that hill of yours? You might as well tell us before you have to tell the cops. You spotted Buddy hanging from the side of that cliff. You spotted him ‘cause you *knew* he was there. Now we have proof the girl was at your place. Where is she?”

“Is she alive?” Kelly’s voice was beginning to crack.

Bonnie watched as Jake, white as a sheet, raised his hands in a futile gesture of surrender and let them fall into his lap. Head lowered, he whispered “I didn’t kill them. I’d never do a thing like that. It was Bad Butch. Butch is a little addled and mean as a rattlesnake. I hired him to guard the mine and the road leading to it.”

“That old abandoned coal mine?” Bonnie said. “What on earth for?”

“Illegal dumping,” Dwight suggested. “Medical waste. Companies pay a lot of money to dispose of that shit in these hills.”

Jake answered with silence. Kelly sat stunned by the realization that Gina was dead. “Where is the girl?” she asked Jake.

“In the mine.”

Kelly pulled her cell phone off her belt and punched in a number she had memorized. “Officer Mahoney, this is Kelly. Please meet me at the Route 19 Bar and Grill immediately. There’s been a . . . development.”

After Officer Mahoney led Jake away, they sat in silence. Kelly was screwing up her courage to go and relate the tragic news to Kate and her mother. Dwight watched Bonnie with a curious mix of sympathy and concern. Bonnie sat in her own personal fog, trying to sort out her feelings for Jake--the old ones and the new ones. She didn’t even notice that Dwight had taken her hand in his. But Kelly did, and a weak smile surfaced through tears.

“When you called me at Jake’s . . . on my cell . . . what . . . how did you know?”

Dwight looked into Bonnie’s eyes. “I’ve suspected something for awhile. When Jake spotted the body I knew. And then, well . . . I knew that I shouldn’t have let you go up there.” There was a flicker of change in Bonnie’s eyes. “Bonnie . . . we had to do it. I mean, even without the killings . . . the illegal dumping . . . that can’t be allowed. These are our mountains, our people.” Dwight emphasized his statement with a squeeze to Bonnie’s hand.

Bonnie looked down at her hand in Dwight’s but did not withdraw it. Instead she returned his squeeze and said, “I understand.”

