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THE STALKIN' THANG
A Short Story
by
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From the air—say, from Five Dollar Frank's tourist-toting airplane--it looked like a ribbon of honey-brown sandstone that crowned the rim of the New River Gorge. To the rock climbers who decorated its face, it was known as the Endless Wall. Four and a half miles of challenging climbing routes invited the world's best climbers to West Virginia. There were an infinite number of other climbing crags scattered along the gorge, but The Wall attracted the best.

Bonnie Franca watched sunlight patterns dance a kaleidoscope of light and shadow on the smooth face of the cliff. The air was crisp with the earthy smell of river, rock and a forest blossoming into redbud, magnolia, and dogwood. She surveyed the people gathered to see the world's top climbing gal, Leeta Gray. *You'd think she was already a movie star*, Bonnie mused. She eyed the knot of press with their cameras and recorders, mingled in with a mottled cluster of river guides and climbers that vied for positions on the rocky talus slope. Bonnie had arrived early enough to claim a spot on the highest boulder, allowing her a view of the route to be climbed and the mob scene below.

To her left, off to themselves, the two Sluss brothers were casually leaning against the crag, their scraggly beards stained with tobacco juice. Bad Ass Billy Ray had his face covered with a cowboy hat pulled low. Dee Dee hid behind dark sunglasses, his long legs crossed and anchored to the ground with an old pair of motorcycle boots. Bonnie

wondered what they were doing here, seeing as how they were the local bad-boys and not at all interested in rock climbing. Ranger Rob, who was supervising the event, was watching them too, and began to move slowly in their direction. In unison, the Sluss boys turned and walked away, Dee Dee pausing just long enough to spit a stream of tobacco juice on the path and turn to glare at Rob through his shades.

Rob was shook his head as he watched them leave. Bonnie found she was shaking her head with him. When Rob looked her way she raised her hand in greeting, but he didn't see her. With her short, blonde hair stuffed into a baseball cap, jeans, and hiking boots, she blended into the river runners and cliff climbers with ease. Bonnie sighed, then pulled her camera and notebook out of her backpack and began to take notes. She fantasized she was an investigative reporter for the *Beckley Herald*—which she was not. At least not yet. She loved to snoop. By the age of twelve she had developed sneaking and spying on her sister into an art form. She lingered in the background at family gatherings, became invisible, and gained a wealth of information. Bonnie felt invisible now and was glad for the solitude of her boulder.

“What a wreck...you'd think they were shooting the movie today. Hey Bonnie, what are you doing here?” Bonnie looked down at a WestvirginiaWhiteWater baseball cap.

Dwight! Well, there went her solitude. Dwight Dennison III had earned his place on her Shit List when she met him during whitewater training years ago. He was *too* everything: too preppie, too polished, too cocky, too rich. Not that there was anything wrong with a coal company inheritance, but she resented the way Dwight flaunted it, especially in front of the guides. Bonnie had managed to avoid him when she gave up

guiding and started rock climbing, but lately she had been running into him more often. He would show up at Kelly's house when Bonnie was there--an unforgivable invasion of girlfriend time. And now here he was, leaning against her personal boulder. Bonnie begrudged a reply. "I'm working." She displayed her notebook and camera. "You've read my column?"

"The Gorge Gossip? Sure, I've read it . . . every night before I go to sleep . . . just so I can have dreams of you."

Bonnie hit the baseball cap with her notebook. "For your information, I'm doing a serious piece. This movie could help boost the state's biggest industry." With the decline of coal mining, the state of West Virginia courted hikers, whitewater enthusiasts and rock climbers, as well as the more common variety of vacationer, with the beauty of its wild mountains.

"Yeah, making the movie here will sure help the local economy," Dwight said. "I heard the producer was only interested in the script if Leeta Gray would play the lead--and Leeta would only do the movie if they filmed it here at the gorge."

"And if the movie's a hit . . ."

"All those tourists' dollars flowing in! I can hear the cash registers ringing now." Dwight smiled up at Bonnie. "Just don't let them bury your story like they usually do."

Bonnie suppressed a grin. He *did* read her column. "Yeah," she said, "like I give a rat's ass . . ."

She was interrupted by a chorus of cheers as a staccato of flashbulbs greeted Leeta Gray and her entourage. Leeta sported shiny black tights, a hot pink top with "SO?" blazoned across the front in glittering rhinestones, and punk-cropped black hair

that stood on end. But what struck Bonnie the most was her tiny size. “No wonder they call her Little Leeta,” she said as she snapped and cocked her old Nikon. Leeta’s followers looked equally punk: a toothpick of a man in black leather and spiked hair stood behind a wiry teenage boy in purple tights and multiple face piercings. As Leeta introduced her husband, Spike, and son, Reno, and, as they pulled the gear out of their backpacks, a quiet expectation settled on the spectators. Crag sounds—the jangle of climbing gear, the roar of the rapids and the distant shouts of rafters in the depths of the gorge—made the silence even more pronounced. Then Leeta began her talk, explaining the reason for the demonstration climb and how she hoped all the press would hype the movie that would be made there.

“Cha-ching!” Dwight imitated the ring of a cash register.

“Just what are you doing here?” Bonnie asked Dwight. He just shrugged. “Are you a Little Leeta fan?” she cooed, trying to detach him from her boulder. Dwight just looked up at her with a crooked grin.

But before Bonnie could think of another witty dig, Leeta began to climb. Every move was slow and deliberate, a ballet on rock, as Leeta shifted her balance over each foot, effortlessly moving up the wall. Reno, her belayer, confidently fed out the rope as she made her way up the cliff. He looked almost bored, as though he had done this a million times. Then Leeta came to the crux of the climb: a jutting ledge. Reno came to attention as the spectators fell into a nervous silence. There was a moment of suspense, as Leeta became a spider walking upside down spotlighted by a barrage of flashbulbs. Everyone held their breath. When she crested the overhang there was an audible sigh of relief. The rest of the climb was unspectacular, and the onlookers drifted into scattered

conversation. Assuming that there would be more climbs, Bonnie was surprised to see that some people were already leaving.

“So, are you going to head out?” Dwight asked as Bonnie climbed down from her rock.

“Got to stick around. There’re some questions I want to ask her.” Now maybe she could shake Dwight’s shadow.

Dwight followed Bonnie down to the base of the route where the reporters were patiently waiting; watching the rope that now disappeared over the lip of the cliff high above them. Usually the belayer would follow the lead climber and remove the protection devices as he ascended, but the demonstration factor made this unnecessary. Bonnie assumed that Reno would simply lower Leeta down so she could answer some questions from the press.

Only nothing happened. Reno looked at his father, his face a question. Suddenly the rope pulled through his hands, and Reno smiled. Leeta was obviously making some adjustments before she reappeared to be lowered. Bonnie watched all this with interest. *Seems like they would be a bit more organized*, she thought, noting that the only people left were members of the press--and Dwight.

“What *are* you doing here?” she asked him again.

He pointed to the cliff. “I’m going to ask her some questions, too.”

“You liar.” She jabbed him in the ribs with her notebook, but Bonnie’s attention was still focused on the hanging rope.

“Hey, Mom, you still there?” Reno, not wanting to pull his rope-tethered mother off the cliff, gave his end a slight shake. A purple-pink climbing rope snake-whipped

down the rock face to a collective gasp from the onlookers. *This must be a joke*, Bonnie thought, as she stared at the tangled mound at Reno's feet.

"What the...? LEE-TA!" Panic edged Spike's voice as he called her name. Reno joined in calling Leeta's name and watched for his mother to reappear. Ranger Rob took off down the trail to get up top as fast as he could. After some shouting with no answer, Spike apologized, packed up, and headed out with Reno close behind.

"This is one hell of a way of avoiding the press," a reporter said as he huffed away.

"Well, Bonnie, looks like she gave you the slip. Want to join me for a beer at Smiley's?" Dwight sounded hopeful. Bonnie shook her head. "How about dinner, then. You've been here since early this morning. You've got to be hungry."

"Doesn't this all seem a bit strange to you?" Bonnie asked, still staring at the top of the cliff.

"No, I think that if two people are hungry they should go eat something and enjoy each other's company."

"The press release said Leeta would definitely be answering questions at the end of the demo. I don't get it." Bonnie began following the trail along the wall, not far behind Leeta's family.

"You can get anything you want . . . steak, salad . . ."

"Listen . . . I'm serious. Her people . . . they were definitely shocked that she did that. Why would she do that? Why wouldn't she come down and just talk to the press? She's obviously not shy. She's a publicity hound."

“Publicity stunt. I heard that one time she disappeared during a promotion. They finally found her climbing up the outside of the building. Look, I’m buying.”

Bonnie caught up to Reno and the parade of people winding along the base of the cliff. “Leeta Gray is known for outrageous publicity stunts . . . is this one of them?” she asked the boy.

“Naw. Oh, she’s done some crazy stuff--lots of crazy stuff, but . . . naw . . .”

“What about the movie? Is she committed to doing the movie?”

“Sure,” Reno said. “Lots of money in that movie.”

“What about this disappearing scene she just pulled? Is this some sort of promotion?”

Reno turned on Bonnie, his face twisted in a frown. His reply was a stony stare.

When they topped the climb out of Endless Wall, a series of ropes and ladders through a cave-like opening, Spike and Reno broke away from the others and walked toward Leeta’s climbing route. Bonnie followed at a discreet distance, Dwight still with her and strangely quiet.

“I’ve got a funny feeling about this,” Bonnie said to Dwight

“Ha! It’s probably a publicity stunt. What’re you planning on doing now? Do you still have a story to write?”

They stopped and watched Ranger Rob who was trying to keep Spike and Reno calm as they thrashed through the brush and trees calling Leeta’s name. “Dammit, this *is* my story,” Bonnie said. “Let’s just wait here and see what happens.” What happened was that after a time of shouting and searching the forest, Leeta’s family gave up and walked out with Ranger Rob, Spike calling 911 on his cell phone.

“Let’s go!” Bonnie said, resigning herself to Dwight’s company.

“Great! I’m starving. Smiley’s okay with you?”

Bonnie walked over to the area, now trampled, that Spike and Reno had been searching.

“What do you think you’re going to find?” an amused Dwight asked as Bonnie, stick in hand, probed the underbrush.

She didn’t even try to keep the irritation out of her voice. “I don’t know. Why don’t you help me look for it?”

“That makes sense,” Dwight said. He picked up his own stick and imitated Bonnie. As expected, the forest floor was trampled near the rim of the wall. Leeta’s tiny boot prints were there, but Bonnie couldn’t find them anywhere else. She looked into the forest. Following the trees she noticed a freshly broken twig that led them to a trail of crushed foliage.

“Getting too dark to see much.” Dwight looked skyward, sniffing the air. Heavy, black clouds had moved into the gorge threatening to unleash a spring storm.

“Look,” Bonnie said, pointing her stick toward the ground. Tiny mountain laurel seedlings had been crushed into the earth as if something heavy had lain there. “Deer bed?” ventured Bonnie.

“Maybe...but what’s this?” Dwight was staring at footprints impressed in a mud-choked part of the trail. They followed the tracks until they disappeared into a creek bed.

“Hiking boots,” Bonnie said.

Dwight chortled. “Really rare in these parts.” They returned to where they had first picked up the tracks. Bonnie lifted up a small bush of rhododendron with her stick, and they looked down at a fan of white powder sheltered under the rhododendron.

“Climber’s chalk,” Dwight said, “*highly* unusual in a climbing area.”

“*Under* a rhododendron bush? And look at the spray pattern. See the shape? Like somebody stepped on a chalk bag and . . . POOF!” Bonnie pulled out her camera and took photographs of the chalk and the footprints. They tried to follow the trail, but they couldn’t see anything beyond the creek in the fading light, so they gave it up and walked the main path to the parking lot. “I’ve got to think,” Bonnie said as she unlocked her car, glad for the chance to recover her solitude.

“Don’t guess you’d consider thinking about going to dinner with me?” Despite the negative posturing, Dwight still sounded hopeful.

Bonnie looked at him. She was hungry and it was tempting to get a free meal, even with Dwight in attendance, but she shook her head. “Too much to do. Thanks, anyway,” she added to be polite and escaped into the sanctuary of her car. She turned the key in her ancient Karman Ghia. Nothing. Dwight started up his Porsche and backed out of his parking space. Bonnie tried again. Nothing. Dwight, showing his southern style, was waiting for her to pull out first. Bonnie sighed, retrieved her backpack, and got in Dwight’s car.

“Dead battery,” she said in a flat voice. Dwight smiled and turned the Porsche toward Smiley’s. “Use your cell phone?” Bonnie called Vergil’s Volkswagen and explained her dilemma. “Thanks, Dwight, they’ll leave it at WestvirginiaWhiteWater for me.”

As she settled into the plush security of a road-worthy car, Bonnie replayed the day's events in her mind. If it was a publicity stunt, and it was obvious that Dwight thought it was, then why would the Gray family be so upset? She felt they were genuinely concerned at Leeta's disappearance. She had overheard most of Spike's conversation when he had made the 911 call. If it wasn't a publicity stunt—then what? Maybe there had been a family argument, and Leeta had pulled the disappearing act just to scare them. She had been known to do crazy things. Bonnie wondered how crazy? But the boot prints, they were man size--not Leeta's tiny feet. And the only prints of her climbing boots were at the cliff rim. Then there was the chalk. Lost in thought, Bonnie was startled when Dwight stopped in front of K-Mart.

“One hour photo,” Dwight said, and he reached across her to open the door. Bonnie flashed in and out of K-Mart, and they were on their way to Smiley's to wait out the hour.

Dwight had been so helpful that Bonnie needed to assuage some guilt for past rudeness. “You're unusually quiet,” she said as he settled into the booth beside her.

“So is this place,” noted Dwight as he looked around the bar at the sprinkling of customers.

“Good! Faster service.” Bonnie slapped the table with her hand. A weathered old hippie with a long ponytail served up two cold beers even before Bonnie and Dwight could order.

“Thanks, Smiley,” Dwight said, “could you add two burgers to that? And by the way, where is everyone?”

“Yeah, Smiley, you got roaches or something?” Smiley looked offended, and Bonnie immediately regretted her overactive mouth.

“They’ve all gone down to the Holiday Inn,” Smiley sniffed. “It’s on account of that girl . . . the one that came here from California to make that movie.”

“Leeta Gray?” Bonnie and Dwight said together.

“She’s the one, alright,” Smiley continued. “Disappeared, or something clever like that. You know those California people . . . wacky.” Smiley had forgotten—or remembered—that *he* was originally from California.

“Why did everyone go to the Holiday Inn, Smiley . . . free beer?”

“Nope!” Smiley swelled up with his announcement: “There was a press conference . . . imagine that . . . right there at the Holiday Inn.”

Bonnie and Dwight looked at each other. “What do you mean . . . *was* a press conference?” But before Smiley could answer, the door swung open spilling people into the bar, demanding his attention. A reporter Bonnie recognized from the afternoon at The Wall sat down at a nearby table.

“Anything interesting happen at the press conference?” she asked, nonchalantly. If he recognized her as a reporter from a competing newspaper he probably wouldn’t tell her much. He opened up to spill the news so easily that Bonnie was miffed that he didn’t remember her from just a few hours ago. It seemed that Leeta’s family had called the news conference, and the police were invited to tag along. Such was the way of publicity stunts. The police had dutifully called the hospital, hotels, and restaurants, but no one had seen Leeta. They were planning to go search the site at first daylight. No, they didn’t

have any signs of foul play. The rope attached to Leeta's harness had been untied, not cut.

A wormy voice came from the depths of the next booth. "Do you think she's a victim of the Stalkin' Thang?" A titter of laughter erupted from river guides who had continued the myth of the "stalkin' thang" throughout the years.

"I feel like I need to go to the police with my evidence," Bonnie whispered to Dwight.

"What evidence?" Dwight almost laughed. "Right now, all you got is a roll of undeveloped film. You got nothing. My bet's with the stalkin' thang."

Bonnie eyed him critically. "A wild story of a night creature that stalks a river guide shantytown. Great display of deductive reasoning."

"Hey," Dwight played a pout, "I know people that have seen it."

Bonnie sipped her beer and ignored him. Life was returning to normal. The jukebox was cranking Bruce Springsteen, and a grinning Smiley was serving up burgers and beer to a growing number of thirsty customers. Suddenly Bonnie saw the Sluss brothers sprawled in a far booth, hidden in the back of the bar. Why hadn't she noticed them before? She couldn't remember if they were there when she arrived. Then Kelly Williams, faithful girlfriend and manager of WWW rafting company, stepped through the door and spotted her friends. "What a day!" Bonnie said, as Kelly sat down across from Dwight.

"What a day? You have no idea!" Kelly exclaimed. "All night there were screaming women at the high camp. This morning I have three tent sites complaining about the noise, and get this, the screaming girls--all four of them--come into the office

this morning demanding their money back because something kept banging their tent all night. I had to give them a refund. I guess it was some drunken climbers I put up at the high camp.” Bonnie tried to interrupt, but Kelly was on a roll. “Then Freddie’s hanging out at the office all day trying to sell some climbing gear. You know how he’s got that little side business . . .”

“Far-out Freddie? Is he still here? I thought he’d admitted himself.” Dwight said.

“Well, the doctor put him on medication. He’s okay, really, as long as he takes it.”

Bonnie was groaning and growing impatient. “Haven’t you heard about the missing Leeta incident?”

“Sure,” Kelly said, “a publicity stunt of some sort. I haven’t paid much attention. I’ve got my own problems, and if I can’t get Freddie to take his meds I’ll have to call his dad to come get him.”

“He shouldn’t be allowed to be at WWW. An unstable situation if there ever was one,” Dwight said.

“Yeah, I’ve spoken to Papa Joe about him but . . . you know, the owner’s nephew and all . . . it’s just that I’ve afraid he’s pilfering to get the equipment he sells.”

“It’s possible,” Dwight remarked, “But hard to prove. I think he has other resources, too.” Bonnie noticed Dwight looked at the Sluss brothers when he said that.

Kelly frowned. “He had a child-sized climbing harness. I can’t believe he *found* that at the gorge. I think I’ve got a real problem on my hands.”

“Well, I’ve got a problem, too,” Bonnie said to jump into the run-away conversation. “The Ghia has a dead battery and lays fallow at the crag parking lot. I was hoping I could play squatter at your place.”

“Anytime, girlfriend, you know that. I can drive you to Das Bunker, but I have to get back to the office, and I’ll be home late . . . too much going on.”

“You’ve got your hands full,” Dwight interjected, “I’ll drop Bonnie off at your place. We’ve got to pick up some photos anyway,” he added quickly before Bonnie could protest. Bonnie was surprised, but pleased, and had not thought about protesting. She needed Dwight now to chauffeur her around. Even his company wasn’t so bad.

After picking up the photos they drove to Das Bunker, Kelly’s little cinderblock house, nestled in a sea of waist high rye grass and wildflowers. The door was always unlocked, so Dwight insisted on coming inside to check the house before leaving Bonnie there alone. A cluster of cellar spiders were all that threatened her safety, but, once inside, a loud thunderclap announced the storm that had been looming since they had left the crags.

Bonnie plopped onto a worn sofa to look at the photos, fanning through the pictures of the climb until she got to the shots of the chalk and the crushed foliage. Her heart sank. There wasn’t much there. The flash had overexposed the white of the climber’s chalk, and the shots of the trampled area were too dark. The prints of the hiking boots were clear enough, but Dwight was right. Hiking boots were the preferred footwear for the thousands of tourists and climbers that populated the gorge. A hard rain drummed the metal roof. The spilled chalk, the footprints—anything that could be construed as evidence--was history.

Dwight had silently settled onto the sofa beside Bonnie, feigning interest in the photos. “Too bad,” he said, “guess you’re back to zero.” A white flash of lightening was

followed by a thunderclap loud enough to shake the walls of the little house. The storm was directly overhead.

“Looks like I’m stuck here for a while,” Dwight said, as he carefully placed his arm on the sofa behind Bonnie’s head. Bonnie looked at him. She didn’t know if he was trying to comfort her or make a pass. Usually he annoyed her. But today he had been different . . . quiet . . . a gentleman. His closeness to her made her feel uncomfortable in an exciting way.

“Dwight, what were you doing at the wall today? You’re not a climber. What were you doing there?”

“Well, I had the day off. It was just something to do.”

“How did you know that I had arrived early? When did you get there?”

“Um . . . I got there early, too. So you’re an aspiring writer?”

“Mostly unpublished, except for my column in the paper, of course. I wrote one book . . . years ago. Got too many rejections, so I gave it up.”

“I’d like to read it. The book, I mean.” Dwight edged closer to Bonnie.

For a fleeting second she thought that he might kiss her. But before an internal debate could start on the merits of this, she changed the subject.

“Dwight . . . what if someone grabbed Leeta and carried her out? That would explain the lack of her footprints, and we saw the boot prints . . . clearly a man’s.”

Dwight sighed. “And the chalk?”

“Someone fell, or it was dropped. That fan pattern is . . . was . . . what happens when I sit on my chalk bag.”

“Kidnapped? That’s a pretty good stretch. For what? Ransom? I doubt Leeta Gray has that much money. It’s a publicity stunt. *They* called a press conference. Think about it.”

“The movie deal,” Bonnie offered. “No Leeta—no movie. Who’d want her out of the picture?”

“Everybody around here thinks this movie’s the best thing to happen since peanut butter met chocolate. My bet’s still on the Stalkin’ Thang,” Dwight said. But he couldn’t slow Bonnie down.

“And another thing . . . the Sluss boys were out there at the wall and left just before Leeta came on the scene.”

“So?”

“So . . . remember a couple of years back when Dee Dee was arrested for attempted rape?”

“Yeah,” Dwight said, “but the girl dropped the charges.”

“Where do those two live now? Their mother threw them out as soon as they turned thirty.”

“Late being better than never, I suppose.” Dwight carefully brought his hand down to rest on Bonnie’s shoulder. “I don’t know where they live, but I’ve seen them at WWW before.”

“WWW? What would they be doing there?” Bonnie drew a deep breath. “Dwight, do you think Billy Ray and Dee Dee are dealing drugs?”

“It’s possible, but I never said that. They might just be visiting some guide friends.”

“That’s where you saw them? Guide Ghetto?” Bonnie couldn’t hide her surprise.

“Look,” Dwight said, “I don’t know about the drug thing. It’s possible, but I’ve had suspicions of my own. I’ve seen them hanging out with Freddie.”

“Far Out? He’s strictly into alcohol,” Bonnie said, disappointed.

“And five-finger discounts. He’s got that truck of his full of lost paddles, life vests . . . clothes.”

“And the connection between Far Out and the Sluss boys?”

“Hey, I can’t prove anything . . . I never saw anything . . . its all conjecture on my part.”

Bonnie thought for awhile. “Where do you think Far Out got a child’s harness to sell?” she finally said.

“It’s probably stolen,” Dwight answered in a flat voice. “But I can’t prove that. Like as not Freddie cleans attics as a sideline.”

“Like as not,” Bonnie said, “but climbers are very protective about their gear . . . lock it up in their car.” She slapped her hands on her thighs. “I’m not back to zero. I need to get a look at that harness.”

Dwight sighed and pulled back his arm. “You’ve got to have your nose into every piece of trouble at the gorge. What do you want to do?”

“I need to get back to WWW. Kelly will know where Freddie is.” Bonnie was already grabbing her backpack and heading out the door.

The storm had passed by the time they arrived at Kelly’s office. Customers walked aimlessly around the grounds in muddy sandals and hiking boots; rock ‘n roll blared across the parking lot from the main pavilion. The little office was chaotic. Two

girls, with wet hair clinging to their heads, had Kelly cornered. One of the girls was crying. “I saw it!” she said. “It was a man, I swear!”

A river guide at the door turned to Dwight. “Stalkin’ Thang,” he said in a low voice.

“Where’s Far-out Freddie?” Dwight asked the guide. It was obvious that Kelly was preoccupied.

“Back in his teepee. Kelly’s got Kojak keeping an eye on him.”

The teepee was part of a housing project of tents and shacks behind Kelly’s office. Tucked into the trees was Freddie’s teepee, which emanated an eerie glow from within. It was guarded by the strong, bronze presence of Kojak standing outside, his bald head shining and his arms crossed like a giant warrior. Kojak had been a river guide until he wrapped his raft full of customers around a bridge piling. After that he drove buses full of rafters to and from the river. Imposing as he was, Bonnie thought of him as a huge teddy bear and probably not a very effective guard. Yet, when Bonnie approached the door of the teepee, Kojak deftly stepped up to block her. Bonnie chose another tack. She schmoozed up to him.

“I heard that Far Out was selling a climbing harness, Ko, and I need a new harness in the worst way.” Bonnie looked up at Kojak and thickened her southern accent. “Ah *really* need that harness.” She batted her eyes as she stared into Kojak’s face—standard southern girl stuff. “Ah’m afraid I’ll have a serious fall with my old one.”

“Well, Kelly said she wants him to stay right here till Papa Joe comes to pick him up.”

“Oh, we’re not going to take Far Out anywhere. I just want to see the harness.”

Bonnie brushed an invisible bug off Kojak’s tee-shirt.

“Well-l-l, all right,” he said as he pulled back a cowhide curtain.

Bonnie and Dwight ducked into the tent. Far Out Freddie sat in front of a small television set tying knots in a piece of rope. Either the TV had no sound, or he was just using it for light. Tiny black eyes reflecting the television screen were set deep in a burnished face. His hair and beard were as faded as the clothes covering a powerful body developed by years of wrestling white water.

Freddie recognized Bonnie with a grin and Dwight with a scowl. “What do *you* want? You come to get me outta here?”

“I’m looking for a new harness, and river gossip has it that you’ve got one for sale,” Bonnie said. Freddie thought for a full minute before he pulled a dirty brown sack close to his body. Bonnie felt Dwight stiffen.

“I got a good man. He finds all kinds of stuff. Those climbers leave shit scattered all over the gorge.” Freddie reached into the bag and pulled out a collection of climbing gear: nuts, slings, a red rope, and a small black harness.

“It might fit you,” Freddie said, eyeing Bonnie’s small frame. She took the harness and studied it. “Don’t you want to try it on? It’ll fit a chick, for sure.” Bonnie slipped the harness up her legs and buckled it. “Perfect fit,” Freddie exclaimed.

“How much?” Dwight asked.

“Wait!” Bonnie said. “Do you have any other climbing equipment for sale?”

Freddie dug into the bag once more. “Nope.”

Bonnie worried that he could hear her mind working. “Well, I sure need another pair of climbing shoes . . . small size . . . but I don’t guess you can help me out.”

Freddie’s eyes seemed to turn inward. “I can talk to my man. Maybe I can get you a pair. Come on by here tomorrow. I’ll fix you up.” He seemed to have forgotten about Kojak.

“How much for the harness?” Dwight asked again.

“Fifty dollars.”

“Sold! All I got are twenties . . . will you take sixty and keep the change?”

Freddie’s eyes crinkled at the corners in a facsimile of a smile as he accepted the bills. Without a word, Dwight led Bonnie by the arm out of the teepee and past Kojak.

“We needed to get out of there,” he said as they walked down the path to a campfire. “Did you see his eyes? Creepy.”

Bonnie laughed. “I’ve only seen Far Out get violent once . . . at Smiley’s. He lost a pool game and tore up the pool table. Papa Joe paid for it, of course.”

Bonnie stopped before they entered the glow of the firelight. “Dwight, I’ve got to watch him. See where he goes for the shoes. If my hunch is right he’ll lead us to the Sluss brothers.”

“I’ll stay here and keep an eye on him, but I want to take you to Kelly’s house first.”

“No way! I’m going to park my tush where I can keep an eye on that teepee. If this harness is Leeta’s . . .” Her voice trailed off. “Look, Far Out got this harness from someone, somewhere, and I’m going to find out who and where.”

“How? How’re you gonna follow Freddie? On foot? Last I knew, Freddie rode a Harley. Not to mention that monster truck of his.”

He had her there. She couldn’t follow Freddie without Dwight’s help. She had to face it; she needed him, or at least his car. “It’s *my* story, you know.”

“Hey, I’m just here to help,” Dwight said.

“Yeah? Well, I *really* can’t figure out why you’re here.”

“You can’t . . . real-l-ly?”

Dwight was smiling as they walked up to a campfire surrounded by three river guides sharing an oversized joint. They greeted Bonnie and Dwight by dutifully passing it to them.

“No, thanks,” Bonnie said, “what I really need is a place to crash for the night. Is Margie’s tree house available this weekend? I heard she was at Myrtle Beach.”

“It is and she is,” coughed one of the guys, pointing to an old spreading oak that sheltered a number of guide tents. A rope ladder, slung behind a sign on the trunk that read “Sugar Shack,” disappeared into the leafy darkness.

The tree house was the perfect set-up: floor and walls of wood with a tarp overhead, it had a door with a wide view of Freddie’s teepee, and it was cozy—girl-guide style--with a thread bare Oriental rug, and bookshelves full of moldy paperbacks. Bonnie pulled an old army cot over to the door and settled in for the night.

Dwight brought Kojak a cold six-pack and then joined the campfire dudes who continued to party until the stars overhead were dimmed by the approaching sun. When Dwight climbed into the tree house, he found Bonnie fast asleep. He watched the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest as her eyelids danced in a dream, and listened to her

soft snore. Then a noise from the teepee grabbed his attention. Freddie was slithering under the tent tarp like a snake. Kojak had fallen asleep long ago; the empty beer cans a testament to Dwight's foresight.

Dwight gently shook Bonnie awake. "Freddie's on the move," he whispered. They climbed down and followed the trail to Dwight's car in the parking lot. Morning mist rose from the ground, but they could see Freddie pushing his motorcycle past Kelly's office, heading to Route 19.

"Crazy like a fox," Dwight remarked as they got into his car.

They followed Freddie onto a narrow road that twisted down the gorge to the river's edge. The fog was thick now: a long dense cloud that filled the gorge and spilled out over the rim. Dwight turned off his headlights and concentrated on keeping Freddie's red tail-light in view. They could see nothing through the thick cloud as the car zigged and zagged. Bonnie was glad that Dwight was at the wheel on this crazy, blind chase. When they reached the river the mist was just above their heads, and they could see Freddie in the distance, spewing gravel, as he turned down the road to the rafting take-out called Fayette Station. Full of noisy rafters in the afternoon, it was deserted this early in the morning. Dwight parked the car and pocketed the cell phone.

They easily followed the sound of the bike, and when that stopped, they could follow the tire marks through the soft river sand. At the take-out the tracks left the beach and led them into the trees. They soon came upon the motorcycle parked under a thick carport of grapevine-covered locust trees. In summer, with the leaves full, they would not have been able to detect it at all. A well-worn groove gave indications that it had seen much use. The path led upward, and they were soon climbing the hill, sliding on wet

rocks, grabbing saplings for support. Just as Bonnie was wondering if they were going to climb up the entire side of the gorge, Freddie came into view trudging up the creek. Then, abruptly, he disappeared behind a small waterfall.

“Where’d he go?” Bonnie kept plodding on, but Dwight grabbed her and pulled her behind a tree with his finger to his lips. In a few minutes Freddie emerged with a pair of climbing shoes dangling from his hand. He loped down the side of the creek and right past Bonnie and Dwight. Then Freddie stopped for a moment, and Bonnie held her breath. If he looked up he was sure to see them. Bonnie was afraid her heartbeat would give her away, but he never turned and continued on his way.

Bonnie said, “We need to take a look at his stash . . . see what else is up there.” They made their way to the waterfall. A small cascade of water spilled over a slight ledge topped with thick layers of Virginia creeper vines and delicately balanced boulders. Behind the water it was pitch black. As uninviting a place as she had ever seen, Bonnie thought, as she looked up at the boulders so precariously placed.

“Damn, I never knew there was a cave here,” Dwight said, as he ducked through the tiny entrance. There was nothing to do but follow him. Once inside, the cave opened up and they were able to stand. A sliver of light from somewhere gave the cave a twilight depth, but they still had to wait for their eyes to adjust to the darkness. Bonnie cursed the lack of a flashlight. She considered caving to be the scariest of pursuits, and she did not want to be there without a light. A whimper from the recesses of the cave made her heart jump.

“My God!” It was Dwight making his way along the wet wall. Bonnie followed him closely. There was something wrong with this cave—it smelled wrong--like old gym

socks and rotting dead things. Then she bumped into Dwight who knocked over something. Now the whimpers turned to loud grunts. Bonnie could hear Dwight searching the dirt floor. “My God,” he said again, but with a breath of relief, “I’ve found a lantern!”

Within minutes the cave room was filled with soft light, and they were aghast at what they saw. Animal bones were scattered everywhere, a torn, filthy sleeping bag was thrown aside and, slumped against the wall, bound and gagged, was Leeta Gray, shivering in the cold. Her short hair was matted against her head, she was barefoot, and the holes in her tights showed bloody skin. A large bump deformed her right temple. They both ran to her side.

“We’re gonna get you out of here,” Dwight said, as he carefully removed the duct tape from her mouth.

“How are you doing? Are you hurt?” Bonnie was untying her wrists as Dwight worked on the rope around her ankles.

“How the hell do you think I’m doing? What took you guys so long? Who the hell are you, anyway? Where’s Spike and Reno? Who *is* that FREAK? He said he could SELL me! Can you believe that? Bashed me up the side of the head! God, get me the hell out of here!”

“He probably thought he could hold you for ransom . . . though I’m not so sure he’s got enough brain power left to pull it off.” Bonnie was helping Leeta to her feet when she noticed Dwight staring at the cave entrance.

There stood Freddie, just inside the circle of light—his stance crouched, his eyes wild--and he was pointing a shotgun at the three of them.

“You think you’re so smart,” he growled. “I know every rock, every tree in this place. I’ve had this place for years. Everybody thinks they’re so damn smart, and Far Out Freddie is so stupid. You’ll see how stupid Freddie is. Those old boys will pay a lot for this chick. I just gotta work my deal.”

“Freddie!” Bonnie searched her brain for a way to distract him. She said the first thing that popped into her mind. “Hey, Far Out . . . buddy . . . there are, um . . . rumors around camp. Are you the Stalkin’ Thang?” Bonnie tried to laugh, but it stuck in her throat.

“Those crazy broads. They got so drunk and were too stuck-up to even speak to me.” Freddie waved the gun wildly, first at Bonnie then at Dwight. In a flash Bonnie realized just how erratic Freddie was, and just how vulnerable they were.

“You insane son of a bitch!” It was Leeta. Bonnie fleetingly wished that Dwight had left the duct tape on her mouth. She tried to give Leeta a warning look. “Who do you think you are, grabbing me like that?”

“I’ve had enough of you, you sewer-mouthed bitch!” Freddie lunged at Leeta and knocked her to the ground with the side of the gun. Everything happened so fast, yet Bonnie saw it in slow motion. Dwight tried to tackle Freddie, but Bonnie was in the way. She tried to sidestep. The butt of the gun hit Dwight on the forehead, and he crumpled to the ground.

Freddie grabbed Bonnie’s arm, squeezing it hard. “Now, tie them up . . . feet and hands . . . hands behind their backs,” he said, and kicked a tangled mass of rope at Bonnie’s feet. She hesitated, but she was looking at Freddie down the twin barrels of a shotgun, so she did as she was told, trying to think of how to keep the bonds loose.

“Make ‘em tight, 'specially on mister big-shot rich guy here.” He kicked Dwight’s leg. “I’m watching you, girlie.” Then he tied Bonnie’s hands and feet. For insurance he slammed the side of the gun down on her back. Bonnie fell forward, landing in Leeta’s lap.

“Hey, you!” Leeta shouted at Freddie’s back.

“SHUT UP!” Bonnie screamed at her. Then her mind briefly slipped into a fuzzy brown place.

Leeta moved, and Bonnie swam to the surface of consciousness. She looked around. Freddie was gone. She could hear Dwight groaning. Good sign. She rolled over to Dwight and knelt over him, nudging him with her knee. He groaned again, and slowly his eyes opened. He looked at Bonnie and smiled.

“You’re still alive,” he said. “I guess we showed him.” A trickle of blood ran down the side of his nose.

“Are you okay?”

“Sure, except for the wreck in my head.” Leeta started to swear under her breath. “She still here?” He made Bonnie smile, and she felt like kissing him for it. But before she could give that thought form, a deafening crash ripped through the cave. When the dust settled they could fully comprehend Freddie’s booby trap. The boulders that had balanced above the entrance now covered the tiny hole. Freddie had effectively buried them alive.

They sat for a time, staring at the blocked entrance.

“We need to get these ropes off,” Dwight said finally. “Pull my knife out of my pocket.” Bonnie followed his directions, finding the little penknife deep in his back jeans

pocket. It wasn't easy to retrieve with her hands tied, and she had the distinct feeling that Dwight was enjoying her efforts. She recovered the knife as best she could, and soon they were all free.

"Now what?" Leeta asked, breaking her silence, and giving voice to their thoughts.

"The cell phone!" Bonnie exclaimed.

"I'll try," Dwight said, "but I don't think it will work in here." And it wouldn't.

"We need to turn off the lantern," he said as he put the cell phone away.

"What?" Bonnie felt freaked enough, but the loss of light?

"He's right," Leeta jumped in, "there's a little crack at the back of this hell hole. It's the only bit of light I've had for days."

"Overnight," Bonnie corrected.

"Okay girls, we've got to find it. If there's an opening back there, it could be our way out of here." With great effort they stood up. Bonnie supported herself against the cave wall, shivering as the damp seeped through her tee shirt. Pain seared her back and spiked up her spine to rest in her head. She took a deep breath. Thank God, no cracked ribs.

A shivering Leeta, arms clamped around her torso in a vain attempt to heat her body, led them through a small hole. Dwight brought the lamp, but they could see nothing except the tall rock walls that enclosed them.

"Its back there." Leeta pointed, but they still couldn't see anything. Dwight turned the lamp down slowly, until a small crescent of daylight appeared forty feet above them.

"Looks doable," Leeta said.

“Looks dangerous,” Dwight replied.

“Looks *very* dangerous,” Bonnie sighed.

“I’ll go first,” Leeta offered. Neither Bonnie nor Dwight challenged her.

“We’ll spot you from below. I don’t know if I can get through that hole, though.”

It was Dwight’s turn to feel unnerved. “Here’s the cell phone--you take it, Leeta--just in case. I mean, you’re the one most likely to make it.”

Leeta attached the phone to the waistband of her tights and began her climb.

Barefoot, cold and bloody, Leeta displayed all the talent that she had shown at Endless Wall. Within minutes she had squeezed through the hole. “Come on,” she said peering into the darkness.

“Your turn, Bon, you can do it. I’ll be down here to catch you if you fall . . . but you won’t,” Dwight said.

Bonnie looked at the climb, took a deep breath, and stepped onto the rock wall. Her hiking boots slipped on the wet surface, but she found her feet, and soon was grunting up the dark rocks. The beginning of the climb was indeed doable, but as she inched up the greasy black rock, Bonnie began to have doubts. The light from above and from the lamp below made the edges of the rock dance, blurring the wall in front of her. Her head spun, and she clung to the rock like a scared beginner. Somewhere below her she could hear Dwight’s words of encouragement as her right leg shook in the dreaded sewing-machine-twitch that climbers experienced once they’d stalled on the rock. The only way to gain control was to move. She focused on the bright slit at the top and moved the offending leg to another foothold. Then she willed her hands to move. One inch at a time was gained until she was at the top. The exit was larger than it looked from the cave

floor, and she crawled through easily. Turning to add her face to Leeta's, Bonnie shouted into the gloom.

“Come on, Dwight, you can do it! This hole is large enough for you to get through,” she said, not at all sure that it was. “You can do it!” she shouted again.

Dwight stepped into the shaft of light, put his hands on the wall, and began his climb. Bonnie could see the blood from his head wound running into his eyes. *Oh God, let him get through this hole*, she prayed. Slowly Dwight muscled his way up, pain etched on his face, until the cave was beneath him. Grasping the grassy tufts above him, with Bonnie and Leeta hauling on each arm, Dwight finally heaved his long body out.

They lay where they had collapsed, too exhausted to do anything but breathe. Bonnie felt the sun warming her skin. She had completely lost track of time in the cave—the sun was high overhead. *Time to move*. She lay there absorbing the sounds of the creek, the insects, the soft rustling of the trees, being alive and out of the dampness and the dark. “Time to move,” she said aloud.

The three of them cracked and moaned in unison as they struggled to stand. Bonnie looked at everyone in a quick assessment. They were covered with mud and scratches. She noted that Leeta was pretty beat up. Dwight was sporting a head bump that seemed to grow before her eyes. But, in spite of the unrelenting trail of blood, now smeared over Dwight's face, he seemed ready to go. “Freddie could still be around. He's sure to know that hole exists.”

“Cell phone, please” Bonnie politely demanded, and promptly dialed 911. “They'll find Freddie, I think, back at the teepee. Let's keep our fingers crossed.” Then

Leeta had to call the Holiday Inn, and squealed with delight when she heard Spike's voice.

"Quiet!" Dwight was looking down the creek bed. "We've got to get out of here before we can start celebrating."

They made slow progress down the hill, joining hands to negotiate the steep trail that led to the take-out. Bonnie wondered how Freddie got Leeta up the slope to the cave. Leeta had answered all their questions regarding the kidnapping, but she couldn't recall much, which was not unusual for victims of head trauma. Bonnie felt a surge of pity for when she did remember. They were making their way down a path that looked as tortured as Leeta's bare feet. On the sandy beach Bonnie felt like her tired legs were being swallowed in quick-sand and Leeta smiled like she was walking barefoot on clouds. When they reached the gravel road, Dwight piggybacked Leeta to the car.

"Be careful," Bonnie said as she eyed the bloody bump on Dwight's forehead, "don't want you to pass out on me."

"And have you drive my Porsche? Not a chance."

They crammed into the little car; Bonnie curled up and squished in the back. Leeta was on the cell phone excitedly talking to Spike. It was slow going. They would constantly have to stop as they encountered buses groaning down the road to pick up rafters. Finally they emerged from the gorge onto Route 19. Leeta was still on the phone when they reached the Holiday Inn, and Spike and Reno were standing out front ready to grab her when she jumped out of the car. Bonnie watched Leeta disappear again, this time into the arms of her family.

The police were there, and Bonnie and Dwight answered their questions while drinking copious amounts of water. Leeta was treated for multiple soft tissue injuries that she received when Freddie had stuffed her into a sleeping bag and dragged her up the slope to the cave. An EMT tended to Dwight, but he refused a trip to the hospital, promising to drive himself there after getting Bonnie back to WWW.

As they drove up to the office, Bonnie saw her little blue car parked nearby. Rafters, freshly showered, wandered around the grounds, and bluegrass music filled the air. Everything seemed normal. Then the office door was flung open, and Kelly bounded down the steps to greet them.

“Well, you missed all the excitement! The police came here and arrested Freddie. Seems he had something to do with that climber’s disappearance. They found him packing his bags. Can you believe it? But the good news is that there was no Stalkin’ Thang last night.” Kelly stopped and gaped. “Say, what happened to you guys?”

Dwight smiled his crooked smile, and put his arm around Bonnie’s shoulder.

“Should we tell her?”

Bonnie didn’t say anything. She just smiled back, feeling the comforting weight of Dwight’s arm.