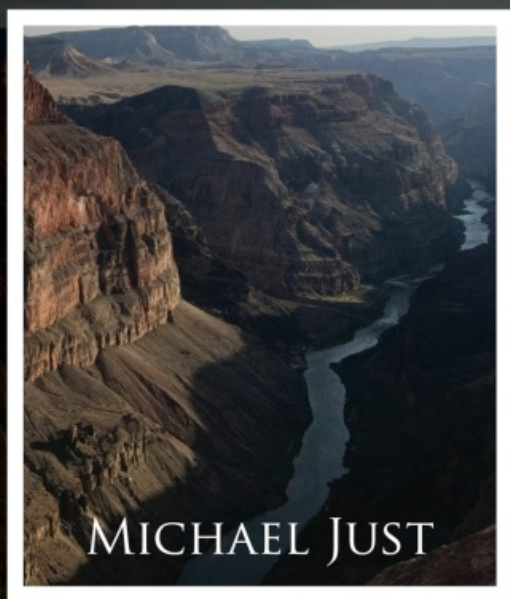


CANYON CALLS



MICHAEL JUST

Haunted with ghosts and murders, ravaged by storms and simmering with romance, yet teased with laughter, *Canyon Calls* is a collection of stories about the Grand Canyon that entertains and inspires vacationers, hikers, armchair adventurers and tourists the world over. *Canyon Calls* juxtaposes mismatched characters inside the metaphor of an endurance-testing natural journey. These short stories are studies of characters comedic and sinister. What happens when untested, incompatible people are stirred together in the harsh cauldron of the Grand Canyon?



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CANYON CALLS

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DEDICATION

To Owen, my teacher, and to Ed
and Don, my teacher's teachers

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***In nature, there is less death and destruction
than death and transmutation.***

**— *Edwin Way Teale*
Circle of the Seasons**

❧ **CACHE** ❧

They weren't the outdoor type, but most of the people Jake guided down weren't. They were all types. Easterners, smalltowners, Europeans, Japanese: people to whom he could barely utter an understanding syllable. So, in the uncomfortable void that often separated people from far-flung parts, they'd ignore him. That meant he didn't have to talk to his customers a lot. He liked that.

It never ceased to amaze him that millions of people visited Grand Canyon but most seldom dipped below its surface before moving on to Vegas, or the Petrified Forest, or wherever it was the world went on to after it dropped off here. For Jake, to stand along the Rim and visit a few lookouts before leaving was like going to the ocean and forgetting to get wet.

Jake lived in Williams, just outside the Park. Mostly, between trips, he hung out in the bars, waiting for people who needed a guide. He could make money, he could teach people about the place if they wanted to learn, and he could be where he loved. He didn't make much, and

right now, that was a problem. Where his people came from, in Shiprock, his nephew was in trouble and needed a good lawyer. Someone said he'd taken a man's eye out in a bar fight in Aztec. He was holed up back home until he could come up with the money for bail and turn himself in. If Jake only had the money. At 38, with a full army pension, life was comfortable, but not enough to come up with the five grand the lawyer said they'd probably set at the bail hearing.

That's what Jake had on his mind when he walked into the lounge at Maswik Lodge and the two men looked up from shooting pool. They didn't even belong together, he thought. They didn't look related. In fact, they seemed mismatched, like God would never have thrown two such people together and expected them to mix well. So, they weren't friends; Jake suspected that from the beginning.

The younger man, who called himself Coyle, glanced up after banking the eight ball in the side. The older, Chuck, with twenty or thirty strands of blond hair combed forward in a bald attempt not to be bald, slapped a fifty on the table and walked away cursing. That was a lot of money to pay for losing a pool game.

Coyle looked like a biker, with long shimmering hair, almost wet, tied in a ponytail; black polyester pants with a skunk stripe down the side didn't fit his image. Deepset brown eyes sunk beneath a thick uni-brow. He poured heavy muscles onto his short bones. He stood five and a half feet above the ground, from the strange circle shaved at the crown of his head to his steel-toed snakeskin boots, pointed like Aladdin's lamp at the tips. White tattoos rippled up and down his shaved forearms—of men at war in chariots, in tanks. Jake had seen all of that and more, tattoo-wise, in the military. Coyle was the tough guy. Jake

had seen plenty of them come and go in the Army, too. Mostly go.

There wasn't a lot to do at Grand Canyon Village at night except go to bars and play a little pool. Jake figured maybe he could hustle up an easy day trip down to Plateau Point the next day. He slipped quarters into the table and beat Coyle in a few strokes. Coyle wanted to buy him a drink.

"I don't drink."

"That 'cuz you're Indian?" Chuck slurred.

"I'm Navajo. And it's just because," Jake corrected him.

"If you don't drink, then what *do* you do?" Coyle articulated with an elocution Jake wouldn't have figured from the man's biker rags.

"I guide. I take people down. Into the Canyon."

"Well that's where we want to go. Chuck and I. Chuck, introduce your fat ass."

"Chuck," the tubby man choked out as he sipped whiskey and water from a stirring straw, a strange thing even for a white man to do.

"And your name?"

"Coyle. Just Coyle. Only thing is, we really want to rough it. We want to go where there are no people," Coyle explained, half-bragging.

"That takes time to get to," Jake explained, inspecting Chuck's bulb-shaped body. "And people have to be in good shape so they don't get heat stroke, even in autumn. The farther down you go, the hotter it gets."

"Aw, Chuck'll be fine," Coyle assuaged him. "He ran a marathon. In college. We want to go down for about four days—"

"I'm sorry," Jake interrupted. "I'm not your man. I've got to be over in Cortez for my nephew's birthday Saturday."

He lied about the place. Jake never told outsiders where his people really lived, something the Army taught him.

"Tomorrow's Friday, so I could only do a day trip. Plateau Point's as far as I could take you. That's halfway down. You get to see the River from there," Jake promised.

Chuck spoke up, more out of a need to prove he, too, could speak, it seemed. "Look..." he fumbled for Jake's name.

"Jake." Coyle supplied him, then added, "We'll make it very handsome for you."

"I don't need the money," Jake bluffed.

"Handsome," Coyle repeated, smiling with such disarming charm, like he'd known Jake all his life.

"Oh, yeah? How good-lookin' am I gonna get?" Jake asked.

He was curious. He thought about his nephew again. It was his birthday, but Jake hadn't been to see him since he'd been discharged from the Army. He'd vowed he wouldn't set foot on the same land as his brother again. Fuck him. If he got the money for his nephew, he'd post it up at the courthouse in Farmington personally.

"Ten thousand facelifts," Coyle murmured.

"You out of your mind?" Jake probed.

"No, Chuck is. He's loaded." Coyle giggled, eyeing Chuck as he stumbled to the bathroom. "In more ways than one, it seems."

Jake thought about it as he swilled spring water. How could he turn down \$10,000? That was bail money and a birthday present all rolled into one.



They met at sunrise the next morning at the South Kaibab Trailhead. When Jake stepped out of the shuttle, Coyle was leaning against a black Mustang convertible with the radio booming Van Halen, arms crossed with a *where the hell've you been* grin. Chuck stood half in the brush, pale and watchful.

"Nice car." Jake nodded, shouldering his backpack.

"I wouldn't know. It's not mine," Coyle said.

Jake surveyed the lot. There wasn't another car in sight.

"We took the shuttle," Coyle explained as he turned off the radio.

He pulled a wad of cash from his black polyester pants, with a white stripe down the sides, the same ones he'd had on the night before. They didn't fit with his boots or his black Jack Daniels T-shirt.

"Half now. Half when we get back. Count it," he barked.

Jake counted the money.

"Okay, let's get started," he said.

"Not here," Coyle said. "We told you we wanted to go off the beaten path. I read the guidebooks. This path is beat."

Jake glanced at Chuck, half-submerged behind a little-leaf mahogany tree as he vomited up last night's Wild Turkey.

"I won't be responsible for anybody's death. NPS charges me for medevacs," Jake warned.

“He’ll be fine. Take us down someway else,” Coyle insisted, staring at Jake with an unmoving face, an unwavering posture.

Jake felt in his pocket for a polished bit of turquoise, a talisman from his brother’s son. His brother’s son was why he was doing this. He wouldn’t do it for his brother.

“We can take South Kaibab Trail down to the Tipoff at Tonto. Tonto Trail hooks up with some rim-to-river trails farther east,” he offered.

“Nah, we looked at the map. We want to see the river from the north bank. There aren’t any bridges that could take us north of the river anywhere east of Bright Angel Canyon,” Coyle said.

“Okay, we can hook up with Clear Creek Trail north of the river,” Jake suggested.

“Clear Creek Trail. Those were the magic words, Jake.” Coyle winked as he slipped on his lumpy backpack with a groan that betrayed its weight. “Let’s go.”

Jake figured the pack was about a hundred pounds, weighted toward the bottom.

“You’re gonna be able to manage that load all the way down, right?” he cautioned.

“We’re sure,” Chuck muttered with a mean, dead look as he emerged from the trees, wiping his quivering upper lip.

Jake knew enough not to argue with the boss.

They descended along the naked ridges of South Kaibab before the desert heat settled in around midmorning. These customers weren’t used to hiking even in the heat of early fall, but Jake had expected that. Most of the tourists that used him were JAM’s—Just Above the Mules—types. The mules ferried the uninitiated tourists down to

Phantom Ranch along Bright Angel Trail, where cabins and prepared meals awaited.

But these guys weren't even prepared as tourists. They weren't dressed for the desert. Coyle wore a brand-new pair of white basketball shoes—hightop Nikes, out of place against his black polyester pants, pants Jake knew from somewhere. He just couldn't remember where.

Beet-faced Chuck was worse off—Columbia hiking boots not yet broken in. He'd been sweating in the air-conditioned bar last night. In this heat, he'd need to sweat out his whiskey first. He was a time bomb, about seventy pounds overweight. Still, Jake knew enough not to argue.

It was their backpacks that labeled Coyle and Chuck as dead amateurs. Here they were, in city clothes, no hats and no sunscreen. But they had the best, the biggest Kelty backpacks money could buy, with the store tags still on. Both packs were misshapen, and mis-packed so the weight strangled their shoulders. Chuck's was almost bursting. Flies buzzed around it already.

"Bacon," Chuck explained. "Fresh bacon."

These guys were such neos, Jake guessed they might've even packed eggs.

"Ah, shit. This is murder on my knees. My goddamn knees," Chuck grouched about 200 yards down. He needed water before they reached Cedar Ridge.

"You gotta go to the bathroom?" Jake asked gently.

"No." He panted. "Why?"

"Because if you don't, you're not drinking enough. Here," Jake handed him his spare water sack along with some salty snacks.

"What're these for?"

"Look at your lips," Coyle derided.

Chuck licked his lips, fumbled the signal mirror Coyle handed him to get a look, waving it around.

“Watch that please,” Jake cautioned as his rocky hand swallowed the mirror. “If a Ranger sees that flash, he’ll think we’re signaling for help. They’ll send someone down, and you’ll have to pay their cost.”

“What is this shit?” Chuck demanded to know as he wiped off the salt crusted around his mouth.

“That’s salt, dumbshit,” Coyle explained.

Jake turned to Coyle.

“I don’t like this,” he warned.

“He’ll be fine,” Coyle promised.

“Where’s his hat? I told you last night South Kaibab doesn’t have shade. You need a hat in the desert,” Jake scolded.

He handed Chuck his sunscreen and his cap, a blue Chicago Cubs cap that didn’t fit the rest of his khaki nylon monochrome.

They hiked down to Cedar Ridge. Chuck crumpled in the shade of the outhouse and sucked in water from Jake’s camelback.

“Not so fast. You’ll puke again,” Jake said. “Eat something.”

Chuck’s shaky fingers fished a melted Payday bar from his pants. He licked the melted caramel off the wrapper.

“You from Chi-town, Jake?” Coyle asked as he swiped the Cubs hat from Chuck’s head.

Jake shook his head and picked up the hat for himself. He took off his backpack and grabbed some nuts.

“Just a sucker for snake-bit losers, then, huh?” Coyle kidded.

“Why don’t you take his pack?” Jake suggested to Coyle. “Yours seems lighter.”

“No, that wouldn’t be good. Mine’s heavier.”

“If he has the food, his is heavier. Food and cooking gear are heavier than a tent and bedrolls,” Jake added.

“Trust me,” Coyle commanded. “That’s his to carry.”

As Coyle bent down to pick up his gear, Jake spied the outlines of a semi-automatic in a side pocket of his backpack.

“He won’t make it. We should head back,” Jake argued. “I’ve seen this a dozen times at least. And I won’t be liable for this man’s heart attack.”

Coyle shook his head, gazing at his host, a host maybe in more ways than one, Jake suspected.

From there on, no more was spoken. They settled into a rhythm. Jake led, but Coyle rode up right behind him, pressuring his pace. South Kaibab was a steep, fast trail, and they made it down to the Kaibab Bridge by midmorning. Chuck panted and held his chest.

“You gotta gimme...a break, Coyle...please,” he begged just before they hit the tunnel on the south bank of the Colorado.

Coyle passed Jake and led the way. He crossed the high river, at a near-record flow for this time of year. Coyle knew more about the trails than he let on, that was clear to Jake now.

Chuck collapsed in the cool black of the short tunnel, carved from the riverside cliff. He wheezed on all fours. Jake stayed back with him. Coyle froze on the old black bridge halfway across. He marched back south across the bridge. Jake saw determination, disguising a subtle rage,

fixed on Coyle's stony, tanned face as he entered the short dark of the cavern.

"Jake says...we stop along Bright Angel Creek...for lunch," Chuck sputtered in short bursts. "There's shade. You douse your head...and cool off."

Coyle strode through the tunnel, picking up speed, and stopped at the south portal. He spied the switchbacks that wound up a box canyon back to the South Rim. The trail was empty.

He launched back into the tunnel. Jake felt a hand slam into his back, knocking him down. Silver glinted in Coyle's hand, even in the darkness. Chuck yanked Jake's backpack off and searched it. Jake felt cold gunmetal on his nostril. Coyle spoke in hushed clarity.

"There was a great flood. A man was walking across a bridge over a swollen river. Halfway across, he saw a snake swimming for its life in the water, just about to go under for the last time. 'Help me,' the snake begged. 'But you're a snake. You'll bite me and I'll die,' the traveler said. 'If I did that, I'd have no one to carry me across, and I'd drown,' the snake reasoned. The man thought about it. Reluctantly, he picked that snake up, slipped it into his jacket and walked across the bridge. As they reached the bank on the other side, the snake slithered out and bit the man in the throat!"

Chuck spilled the gear out from Jake's backpack. He came up with Jake's knife and flipped open the four-finger blade. He reached from behind and put it to Jake's throat.

"The man collapsed on the bridge and started to die," Coyle went on. "He said, 'But you promised you wouldn't bite.' As the snake slithered away to the high ground, it

looked back and said, ‘Now, you knew what I was when you picked me up.’”

Chuck withdrew the knife. He grabbed Jake’s spare water jug and gulped it.

“Alright, Indio, stand up,” Coyle said with good nature as he stepped back. “This is the deal. We’re going to walk through that campground on the other side, and you’re going to smile and you’ll not say a word. If you do, I’ll bleed you.”

Chuck twisted Jake’s arm behind his back and pulled him to his feet. He shoved him out the far side of the tunnel.

“Then I’ll shoot everyone else in camp, starting with the youngest kid first,” Coyle promised.

They marched through Phantom, Jake sandwiched between Chuck in front and Coyle in back. Terry, an NPS volunteer who knew Jake well, was crossing the bridge over Bright Angel Creek to check backcountry permits at the campground as the three men snaked through the Box on their way to Clear Creek Trail. Jake knew this was his only chance. They might not see a soul once they hit Clear Creek.

“Hey, Jake, long time no see,” Terry sang, stopping.

Coyle ambled beyond the bridge crossing and stood behind Terry. He winked at Jake.

“How’ve ya been?” Terry asked in his distantly New Zealand accent, almost lost within his American vernacular.

“I’ve been good,” Jake said.

“I thought you said you were heading home for something? Your brother or something?” Terry asked with a confused smile.

“Not my brother. My brother’s son.”

“Oh, okay,” Terry said, uncomfortable with Jake’s flatness, his desire to end the conversation and move on.

Jake saw Terry’s quizzical expression, framed by long blond hair, growing smaller as Terry backed across the bridge and finally turned down the camp trail.

“Well, see ya sometime,” Terry shrugged.

They headed north of the Ranch and headed east up Clear Creek. They trammed up the east ledge of Bright Angel Canyon. Then they wound south and caught sight of the River before turning north along the trail into a giant amphitheater. The trail was walled off by cliffs on one side and a steep drop-off on the other.

When they were safely away from the river and deep into the amphitheater, in a place where they could see hikers coming in either direction for about a quarter-mile, Coyle pulled out his gun. Chuck shed his pack and suckled Jake’s camelback. If it was bacon in there, it’d gone bad.

Coyle trained the gun on Jake’s temple but kept a respectable distance, stepping back from the drop-off into the shade of an overhang. Storm clouds gathered along the South Rim, and Jake heard mumbled thunder as he stood on the edge of the trail beside Chuck. The canyon wall plummeted at his toes’ edge. Coyle scanned the trail on either side of the bowl-shaped canyon. There’d be no witnesses.

“Push him, Jake,” Coyle commanded with amusement.

A wind whipped out of nowhere.

“Push him, Jake,” he repeated, “or he pushes you.”

Chuck froze with the tube from the camelback half in his mouth. His eyes bulged as the water poured from his lips. The wind died. The flies buzzing Chuck’s backpack.

Jake's thoughts froze in place. When he woke up this morning, he just wanted to brush his teeth and hate his brother.

Five hours later, he was either dead, or a murderer. Every crevice in Chuck's sobbing baby face stood out so sharp. The sandstone seemed alive, heaving. Jake noticed the big rock under Coyle's left boot was loose. If he could pretend to fall, then pull Coyle's ankle, maybe Coyle would fall off instead. But Coyle was too far from the cliff.

A hand jarred Jake's shoulder, and he teetered over the precipice. Chuck used all his might to shove Jake over the edge. Jake dug in with his left heel. He bent low and pushed back. Chuck put all his weight into finishing Jake, but he'd rushed. He was off-balance. Jake used his left foot as a pivot and tried swinging Chuck around. Chuck was too heavy. All Jake could see was that sweaty red face, burned even brighter by the heat, by the effort of throwing a well-built, compact man to his death. Those yellow eyes and yellow teeth matched. The detail was unimaginable, like the gray hairs in Chuck's flaring nostrils.

Maybe that's how it is before you die, Jake thought. You draw the whole world in with one breath. He heard Coyle chuckle in the background.

Something had to give—Chuck's weight or Jake's muscle. Chuck's eyes wavered for just a moment. He lost his focus, just for a second. That was all Jake needed. With his whole body a fulcrum, he swung Chuck. They were in a dance. Coyle's laughter stopped.

In silence, Jake swung Chuck off the cliff. Chuck sailed over. No scream. Just the skitter of rubble after his feet, and the soft thud of flesh-shrouded bone against the bottom rock of the drainage. He swung back and panted,

staring at Coyle, in the shade of the overhang. He waited for the sound of the gun in that split-second before he died.

"I knew that dumb son of a bitch would try you. Glad it was you." Coyle congratulated Jake with an endearing smile. "Pick up the bones, Indio," he instructed, glancing down at the backpack next to him crawling with flies.

Jake peered into the gorge. He couldn't spot Chuck's body, but he knew he'd be burying it before night. He pulled Chuck's backpack up to his shoulder and slipped it on. The sound of rustling plastic, the whiff of dead flesh, were all that lived in his senses, that and the glint of sun off the barrel of Coyle's black semi-automatic.

"Let's go hide things," Coyle suggested.

They hiked east until Jake found a gentler gradient down to the foot of the drainage where the body had landed. The head was crushed, the drying blood matted with bits of grey from inside the chipped skull. It reminded Jake of broken pottery. He wondered how Chuck had grown as old as he had with what little he seemed to have inside that broken head. So much fear and miscalculation lingered in his dead face. A small cave jutted out nearby, and Coyle made Jake stuff the heavy body inside. Jake crammed, but it wouldn't fit.

"I'll show you how to do that," Coyle replied with relish as he pulled a camp saw from his backpack.

He kept Jake a safe distance away, but not so far he could run off. He calmly felt for the ripples in Chuck's ample arms and sawed to the bone, as he recited:

Prince Wen Hui's cook
Was cutting up an ox.
Out went a hand,
Down went a shoulder.

Coyle cleaved at the juncture between Chuck's upper arm and shoulder.

He planted a foot,
He pressed with a knee,
The ox fell apart,
With a whisper,
The bright cleaver murmured
Like a gentle wind.
Rhythm! Timing!
Like a sacred dance

Coyle poured himself into the work, and Jake started to move off, very slowly. Coyle became aware of him again. He picked up the pistol by his foot and motioned Jake back.

"Kneel. Hands under the knees."

He slipped out his tongue and smiled as he carved off Chuck's limbs like an expert butcher.

"I multi-task," he explained, and dropped back into his mindful fugue.

Now I see nothing
With the eye. My whole being
Apprehends.
My senses are idle. The spirit
Free to work without plan
Follows its own instinct
Guided by natural line,
By the secret opening,
the hidden space,
My cleaver finds its own way.
I cut through no joint,
chop no bone.

“Now he fits,” Coyle uttered in satisfaction as he tossed the arms into the crevasse. “Lift the fucker up and in, Jake,” he instructed musically. “Throw in some rubble while you’re at it.”

Jake rose and tossed Chuck’s armless body into the cranny.

Then I withdraw the blade,
I stand still
And let the joy of the work
Sink in.

Coyle wiped off his saw.

I clean the blade
And put it away.

He stashed the saw in the backpack.

“Never know when I’ll need this again, eh?” he teased as Jake filled the rest of the cave with rocks. “That’s Chuang Tzu. That’s how you do without doing. That’s how the action takes care of itself.”

They hiked off-trail, north up Zoroaster Canyon, just off Clear Creek Trail. Jake knew if they scrambled off-trail, their chances of running into someone were just about zero. Coyle knew, too. He’d been studying Jake’s map.

It was near nightfall now. He made Jake pitch camp and build a fire with driftwood from a dead honey mesquite tree near the creekbed running through the canyon. Then he tied him up with Jake’s own nylon rope.

“Lucky I told you to bring this along, isn’t it?” Coyle remarked. “Being a sociopath has its advantages. I like to

think of it as having an evolutionary leg up on the less manipulative.”

He smiled as he boiled chicken pasta on Jake’s Coleman. He glanced up as he spooned in a sample of half-cooked noodles and twisted his smile into a displeased grimace.

“Of course, you wouldn’t know about sociopaths, being as it is you’re not one. We’re exceedingly rare, Indio. I mean, how many people are lucky enough to be born without a damned conscience? I think I’m blessed, because I get to do more things than most people. I get more freedom. I mean, when I was ten, they sent me to a BD school—that’s ‘behavior disordered’—because I had the idea to blow up a kitten by taping an M-eighty to the roof of its tiny mouth. But those are useless antics, aren’t they, Indio? By the time I was fifteen, I gave up kid shit. But I realized I had freedom because I could do things other people couldn’t.”

The overcooked pasta crackled as it fused to the side of the pot. Coyle was oblivious as he touted the advantages.

“I can sleep with any woman I want. Not just because I’m good-looking, which of course I am, but because sociopaths tend to be superficially charming. We can make people do things. Get women into bed. Make an old woman with a lot of money stashed in the sugar trust us. We have skills. And more important, we’re not afraid to use them. Oh,” he muttered as he glanced down at the hissing pot.

He scraped out the pasta and deposited blackened, waterless heaps into Jake’s plastic bowl.

“Here, have some water,” he said as he put the camel-back to Jake’s lips. Jake took a long sip.

“So, here I am, fresh out of prison, and I get this great idea. Sociopaths are very creative in a criminogenic kind of way. I call it *criminogenesis*. Creativity in crime. They’ll make a movie about me one day, I’m sure.”

Coyle grew expansive, truly enamored with telling someone about his plan.

“I get the idea that I’d like some money. Because I want to buy a big TV, a flatscreen plasma television with a surround-sound home entertainment system, Tivo, the works. See, Jake, they didn’t have flatscreen technology when they trucked me into prison. But I get out, I’m indigent. Isn’t that truly a set-up? They let you out of prison and don’t give you but the few dollars you saved while you were in there. And then, they expect you to find yourself.”

He sat in front of Jake in a half-lotus, gesturing with his knife-bitten hands.

“That takes time, to build up a nest egg big enough to buy a superlative entertainment system so I could see those tree creatures’ faces in *Lord of the Rings* really close up. And that’s the other thing about sociopaths. We can’t wait! I’m damned impatient. I have an impulse control disorder,” Coyle explained as he shoveled the blackened stew, dried like hash, through his chiseled lips.

“Ow, fuck!” he exclaimed as he whipped the pot against a boulder and yanked the camelback to his lips, soothing the blister.

“Better let this cool down a bit. So, I hear about these men that are interested in coffinite. Know what that is?”

Jake shook his head as he loosened the rope. He hoped Coyle would go on forever.

“High-grade ore.”

Jake delivered a blank stare.

“You know, fissile material. Uranium. And these guys I’m in prison with want some. Only they’re in for a long time. Busted on federal raps, like me. They have friends on the outside who want it. From Mexico. Only they’re not Mexican. They’ll pay top dollar. They even fronted me the cash I gave you. I know there’s a uranium mine in Four Corners, outside of Shiprock.” Coyle squirted a little water into his bowl and worked it into the dry stew, creating a mash.

“Hungry?” he asked, offering the bowl to Jake, who shook his head. “I wasn’t going to give you any anyway. Why waste food on a dead man, right?” He snickered politely.

He sampled the food with his ginger upper lip.

“Anyway, I’m sure you’ll see I’m going to need some help on the inside of this mine, right? Who does God line me up with? Chuck,” he scoffed. “Fuckhead Chuck. And yet, he was a corruptible mine administrator. That’s another thing about sociopaths. We read people very well. For instance, I knew you were hard up for money right when I saw you. You had that hungry look. And for a man, it’s either broads or money they’re hungry for. I knew in ten seconds I could get you down here with the right bait,” Coyle mumbled as he gobbled up the stew. “You were easy.”

He finished up and cleaned his teeth with a hankie he pulled from his vest pocket.

“Got any toothpaste, Jake?”

“Bottom zipper of my pack.”

Coyle fished out the toothpaste and rubbed it over his gums.

“But one thing I’ve learned over my thirty-four years—anything worth doing in life requires sacrifice. I had to spill blood. Chuck got me in, but one of the guards wouldn’t lay it down. So I had to. I just had to.

“Chuck didn’t want me to. He didn’t even want to come here. He thought he was going to get paid back at the mine. Hah! But once that guard went down, he had no choice. To be frank, he wasn’t getting any money in any event. But I needed somebody to carry the guard down here. I was supposed to rendezvous with the buyers down here anyway. So, I figured, kill three birds with one stone—make the exchange, dump the guard, kill Chuck. Not bad, huh?”

“No, pretty clever,” Jake rejoined matter-of-factly.

“Let me check those knots for you, Jake.”

Coyle rose from his half-lotus pose and leveled Jake with a hefty kick.

“Turn over, please.”

Jake made a reluctant half-revolution on the rock and scrub, rising to his knees.

“Flat please, Jake,” Coyle coached. He hammered him in the upper back with his boot, then fell on the backs of Jake’s thighs with his knees, checking the loose knots.

“My, my, you are a clever one. Were you in the military?”

Jake shook his head with a grimace. Blood from his cheek scraped off onto a shard of shale.

“I want us to tell the truth to one another.”

Coyle dug the barrel of his gun into Jake’s other cheek.

“Again?”

Jake nodded. Coyle reached into his pack and pulled out handcuffs.

“It’s handy when you kill a guard. You get everything he had. I was saving these for Chuck.”

He squeezed the manacles onto Jake’s thick wrists and locked them down.

“There. That’s nice. Special forces?”

Jake nodded.

“Judging from your tattoo, I’d say Rangers.”

“You?” Jake croaked, trying to hide his pain.

“No, I couldn’t get past the damn psychologicals.”

Coyle pulled him back up and dusted off Jake’s broad shoulders.

“C’mon, Coyle. I’m sure you could’ve faked it,” Jake replied.

“Oh, alright. It was my past. An aggravated sexual assault during basic training. Can you believe it? She tells me she’s fourteen. Turns out, she’s only eleven. How high’d you go, Indio?”

“Sergeant. Command sergeant-major.”

“They call that a sergeant-major in the Marines. That was my fraternity. My DI tried to destroy me. But I beat his ass. By staying calm. I had not one write-up in boot camp. Not one. I won.”

The sun had long ago disappeared, and the world cooled behind their backs as they faced the fire. Coyle tossed Jake his own bedroll.

“Now, you’ll find that I don’t sleep at all, but every other night. And me and Chuck got a good night’s sleep last night. I made him give me a blowjob so I could relax. He wasn’t very good, though, being as it was his first time.” Coyle sighed. “So, I’m going to stare at you all night. If you try anything, I just might make the same arrangement with you I made with Chuck last night.”

With that, he said not another word the rest of that long night.

Jake covered up as best as he could, and Coyle even tucked in the corners of the sleeping bag over Jake's shoulders and ran his fingers through Jake's brush cut. He patted Jake's flattop like porcupine quills. He seemed to like the sensation, because he kept up with it for a couple minutes. Jake closed his eyes and rested. He concluded he'd be dead by tomorrow sundown.

Images floated in the sleepless black. His nephew Mason's face, smiling after that last sing. Mason's face reformed into Jake's brother Buick's face. Jake hadn't spoken to him since he'd left Shiprock five years ago, before he signed up for one more tour and shipped to Afghanistan for interrogation, intelligence and interdiction—the Three I's, the Holy Trinity.

Buick stole the family business, a duty-free cigarette concession, out from under him. Jake was older, but Buick convinced his sister, Legertha, who'd inherited it, to let Buick run it after their mother died. His sister lived in Tuba City now, and he wouldn't speak to her, either.

They all could see Buick would run it into the ground. His sister was punishing Jake for taking off after Dad died. Fuck her. And Buick, too. He'd never go back. Still, he loved Mason like his own child.

Jake cracked open his eyes. Coyle stared at him from across the fire.

"I don't disappoint, Indio."

Jake shut his eyes. Buick's letter to Kabul last year before Jake's tour was through passed before him.

"I was wrong. I was drunk, and it was wrong."

The words were in a woman's hand, Legertha's, since Buick didn't know how to write. He'd enclosed a picture

with his apology letter. Buick was in black pants with a white stripe down the side. Skunk pants, Jake thought back then. Skunk motherfucker. He drank away the cigarette concession. That was like gold, and it was gone. Fuck him, Jake thought back then. Now, he wished he'd written back, but it was too late. He would be dead by tomorrow's sunset.

After he died, he'd come back and haunt Buick. He wouldn't want to, but he would just the same. He'd seen so much death in the theater. That was why they'd had the Enemy Way Ceremony in Kayenta, to scrape off the ghosts from Jake. Mason organized it. Jake told him that if Buick or Legertha came, he wouldn't.

He couldn't wait for the sun to come up, so he could stop thinking about the thing he'd left undone; but the night went on in endless repeats of Mason's face, then Buick's, then the words in that letter. Once in a while, he'd crack open an eye, and see Coyle's blurry image staring at him.

Finally, he felt the cool, weak-blue sky leach through his eyelids. He opened them. He sniffed the sage, heard a ringtail skitter around camp. He thought he smelled rain, but it must have been his imagination. The rise of light licked the sheer west wall of Zoroaster Canyon, first indigo, then red, then bleached beige. A pair of soaring ravens croaked as they pinched the blanket of night in their talons and rolled it west to uncover what the witches had painted onto the sky of Jake's last day.

He raised his head. Coyle stared at him, catatonic and stubble-faced. He hadn't moved all night.

"It's time, Indio."

Jake sat up, but Coyle kicked him down. He knew what Coyle wanted. He rolled over. He showed him the cuffs were still locked.

“Good boy. Nice and tight,” he praised as he packed up camp. He didn’t leave anything behind.

“Okay, stand up,” he said as he waved his gun like a wand.

Jake obliged.

“Here’s the deal, Jake. You take me to Cheyava Falls.”

“Cheyava Falls is miles off-trail.”

“Well, if you can’t get me there, I guess I’ll have to shoot you now.”

“I’ll get you there,” Jake promised.

Coyle approached Jake and uncuffed him.

“Door Number One: you misdirect me or try to run off, I shoot you in the balls then just graze the back of your head. I know how to leave a man a vegetable. You’ll be a permanent guest of the VA, okay? Door Number Two: you get me to the Falls. One bullet to the back of the head, to the heart of the medulla oblongata.”

He clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, mimicking the sound of a bullet.

“And Door Number Three?” Jake asked as they hiked.

“Chuck already chose that door,” Coyle explained. “How far are the falls?”

“About five miles.”

“You figure that’s about two hours, Indio?”

“About.”

Jake led the way. It heated up quick in the inner canyon. Before the sun breached the east walls, it broke eighty. Coyle stopped three times for water breaks. Jake got none. The flies pestered his backpack even before sunrise, just as the carrion beetles had rustled to and from

it across the pebbles all night long. When and where Coyle planned to dump the guard's body, Jake didn't know.

But by midmorning, they'd made it to the falls, just a dry hole in the middle of the scarp face this time of year. They fell from a mouth in the middle of a cliff face. The shading walls of Ottoman Amphitheater loomed north.

Jake felt his throat swell up. It was thirst, but it was life's end, too. He saw men up ahead, loitering in the shade. Men from another country, he could tell. They were white, but they weren't Anglo. There were five—awkward, hunched over from the weight of their backpacks and sweating in their cotton tees and jeans. They reminded him of Chuck and Coyle yesterday morning. Each step he took, he expected to hear the shot peel the split-second before it pierced his skull. His heart pounded. The flies buzzed him, buzzed the body he was carrying. He felt a kinship with it, knowing his would soon be like it.

The men headed toward Coyle. Jake turned and saw Coyle grimace as the heavy load pulled at his shoulders. He slipped off his backpack. His eyes darted from man to man. One man's close-cropped hair was dyed punk-rock blond. Another was a natural redhead. They could've been Chechen, Russian, Kurdish. They faced off twenty yards away.

Coyle crouched behind a boulder and aimed at the man who seemed the leader, the one who stood beside Clear Creek. Three of them stood on one side of the narrow creek. The other two stood on the other side of the creek. More could have been hiding in the thick willow brush between the creek and the cliff base just north.

“No offense!” Coyle shouted. “But I want to live, and you multiply us by two-point-five!”

The leader, balding, potbellied, with a thin, black mustache spoke. “Don’t worry! You get to live! We get to die later! Just put the gun off!”

“Uh-uh!” Coyle insisted. “Put down the money and get out!”

He waved his free hand toward his backpack.

“There’s your uranium!”

The leader and his beefy lieutenant stepped toward Jake and Coyle with a daypack.

“No! You come alone, Sultan!” Coyle demanded.

“Two of you, two of us!” the angry leader shouted. “No weapons, see?”

He raised his arms. His lieutenant, wearing just a T-shirt, turned in a circle with arms raised. Coyle waved them in and tracked the leader with his gun. The leader glanced at Jake.

“Who’s the guy?” he asked.

“My lawyer.”

Jake guessed he might have been from a Russian republic from the way he spoke English.

The men tiptoed around Jake and dropped the moneybag at Coyle’s feet. Backing away, the leader lifted up the uranium pack with both hands.

The leader handed the pack to his lieutenant. They both backed away.

“Stop,” Coyle commanded.

“What?” the leader smiled.

“Stop or I will take out the top of your damn skulls.”

“Okay, okay,” the leader soothed as he and his man froze. “Cool.”

Looking toward the other three, Jake saw glinting metal on a narrow bench above the Falls. He spotted the pink flesh of a sniper against the sandstone.

“Come here, Jake.”

Jake ducked over.

“Stand right there.”

Coyle had him stand in the fire zone between Coyle and the other three men. Any ambush would hit Jake first. Jake felt each slow breath trickle in, and trickle out. It was how he'd been trained.

Coyle tossed the daypack at Jake. “What’s inside?”

“Money,” Jake said as he unzipped the main compartment. “A shitload.”

“Take it and follow me,” Coyle commanded. “Turn around, asshole,” Coyle ordered the leader.

“But...but what is this?” the leader stammered.

“It’s hostage time,” Coyle sang out. “Tell your men, in English, to go on back to the Rim. Have this man with you take the bomb dust. You’ll be up later, soon as I know I’m safe.”

It was a good plan, Jake thought. When the other four got far enough along, Coyle could either release the leader or kill him and head up the other way. These guys had scrambled down without a trail, but Coyle had Clear Creek Trail as his back door home. He'd probably head up to North Rim Lodge and drive out toward Jacob Lake. Maybe he had a car planted.

Only, Coyle hadn't seen the sniper.

“Go!” the leader barked to his men. “To the top!”

Reluctantly, the three men by the creek backed off. His massive lieutenant slung the ore pack over his shoulder and followed them. Jake knew the sniper would take his headshot now. It was the only way to save his boss be-

fore Coyle either shot him or pulled him into the thickets of willow along the creekbed.

Coyle gathered in the ample cotton of the leader's sweaty black T-shirt and walked him backward with the gun at his temple. The first shot rang out from the sniper, hitting the leader in the chest.

Jake and Coyle dove behind the boulder.

"You motherfuckers! Idiots!" Coyle shouted out. "Sociopaths do have feelings, Jake," he whispered as he smiled at him.

The other four men rushed back down to the creek and took cover, their guns pointed toward the ground. They were trained well. They were probably internal security, or intelligence. Jake made them as nationals and not terrorists.

"See if he has a gun," Coyle said, nodding his head toward the leader, who lay in the sun with an oozing hole bored through his heart.

"You wanna shoot me, then shoot me. But I'm not going out there to get shot by them," Jake said.

Coyle looked him in the eye.

"They'll kill you, too. Besides, once you've got his gun, Ranger man, you could come after me."

Jake knew he was right.

"I want half the money," Jake bargained.

Coyle nodded.

Jake rolled out from the rock, triggering a volley of accurate fire. He used the leader as cover as Coyle laid down some suppression. The leader had an automatic strapped to his ankle. Jake ripped it out and fired, downing the kid with the dyed hair before he spun back behind the rock.

This was where all that shooting with Buick when they'd been kids and shot pigeons down by the San Juan paid off. Jake had been in sniper school before he transferred to drug interdiction.

"Glad to have you on my side," Coyle panted. "Good to be an American."

"There's a shooter," Jake pointed. "Up along that ridge above the falls. He has to stand to fire. Pop your head up for a second and draw him up. I'll get him."

Jake snaked around the rock. Coyle nudged his head up and dropped down just as fast. The sniper rose like a gallery target. Jake fired and struck him in the left chest. The sniper stumbled over the ledge.

"You get him?"

Jake nodded.

"Hey, man, nice shot," Coyle sang. "Sociopaths love danger."

Jake saw the other three scrambling up the creek toward the Amphitheater. They were way out of firing range. They had the uranium. North was their only way out. There were no bridges back south over the river between here and Lee's Ferry.

"What's happening out there, Jake?"

"Take a look and see," Jake whispered.

He felt the barrel of Coyle's gun twist into the back of his head, stinging as it ground in sand.

"I already did," Coyle assured. "Raise your hands, kneel, drop the gun, Indio."

Jake did as he was told. But he didn't drop the automatic.

"Drop it, Jake."

"It's empty."

"Drop it!"

Coyle shot at him, right past his left ear. It ricocheted and rang so loud Jake went deaf in that ear. Coyle dug the gun back into his neck and whispered in his right ear, "Next time, it's the Christopher Reeve show, Jake."

Jake dropped the pistol. It clinked against the slick rock.

"Can I have your money?" Coyle asked.

Jake hesitated. "You got the money," he finally said.

"The money we paid you up top. You won't be needing it anymore."

Jake looked at the backpack with the flies crawling all over it. He remembered where he recognized those polyester pants Coyle wore. They were the same ones his brother had on in the picture he'd sent to Jake in Kabul. They were guard's pants. He remembered—Buick had gotten a guard job at the uranium mine.

"Don't worry, I'll kill you like I said. You've been good to me. I don't like seeing indigenous peoples hurt unnecessarily," Coyle added.

"How you figure to find your way back up without me?"

"Well, now, I have your map. I have your water. I have the cash," he said with satisfaction as Jake handed him the \$5,000.

Coyle raised his gun and put up his other hand to shield himself from the blow back. His hand was too close. Jake grabbed onto it and twisted it at the wrist. The gun went off as Jake tossed him head-first into the ground.

Coyle rolled downhill to the edge of a cliff that dropped from the Tapeats Sandstone. He slid with the gravel a few feet before it stopped his momentum. He still had his gun. He aimed. Jake dove for his own weapon. He

fired and hit Coyle in his trigger arm. Coyle lost his pistol.

Jake walked down the talus and stood above him, his eclipsing shadow spread across Coyle's gleaming, contorted face.

"Way I see it, Jake, you should kill me."

"The man in the bag, he's an Indian?" Jake quizzed.

"I told myself I'd never go back to prison. Or let the Main Cop kill me on his own terms, strapped to a gurney with a needle in my arm."

"Was he Navajo?"

"Kill me, Jake."

Coyle held on with his bloody arm. He looked at Jake, then glanced at the pack with the corpse.

"What, he your brother or something?" he asked. He stared at Jake. He seemed to figure it out. "Yeah. Yeah, he was an Indian. Looked just like you, too."

Jake raised his gun and aimed for the forehead.

"Atta boy," Coyle encouraged.

Jake felt the sweat twist into his eyes through the squinting fissures of anger mixed with grief. There were tears in there mixed with the sweat. He remembered Buick's face, saw it somehow in Coyle's. He let his arm fall back to rest.

"You'd make a lousy sociopath," Coyle panted. He glanced down over the cliff edge. "The money's yours, Jake. Give him a nice funeral."

He pushed off and slid down the bluff. Jake heard the crack a few seconds later. He walked back to the boulder that had saved them. The hoard of cash bulged from one backpack. The remains of his brother rested in the other. He waved the deer flies and shimmering blue-back wasps off the one with the body and dusted off a few ants from

the cover. He trembled. He unzipped the main compartment. He exhumed the biggest bag.

It was heavy—the torso, he guessed. He dug his hands into death and sorrow so deep the pack had no bottom, feeling for the right part, disinterring the bag that held the head. He pulled out the thick bag and held it before him like a chalice. He pulled off the green plastic shroud. But he couldn't look. He couldn't lay his eyes on death, even though Buick was already haunting him. He opened his eyes.

And stared at a man he'd never seen in his life.

He heard it before he saw it, the rotors of the helicopter swooping up from Granite Gorge. He could tell from the sound it was an NPS chopper, nothing military. Then he saw its shadow ripple along the scarp face. There were four men inside, three in SWAT gear and an NPS pilot. The SWATs jumped out even before it touched down on the flattest piece of ground around.

The two younger SWATs crouched below the blades, fanned out and took up defensive positions around the perimeter.

"Where the hell were you?" Jake shouted above the slowing rotors.

The team commander, sweat soaking the hem of his camouflage cap, crouched low along with Jake.

"The intake on our gunship sucked in some sand and jammed the blades! We had to wait for NPS to send us up!"

Between the copter and the ringing in his left ear, Jake made out about every other word.

"There's three men scrambling up, probably towards Cape Royal!" he shouted, pointing east with a shaky finger.

The motor eased.

"We spotted 'em on the way in. We got NPS police, FBI, state police, half the county boxing 'em in on either side," the commander said. "What happened to your customers?"

"Don't you know?" Jake demanded.

"Your wire didn't work too well through all this geological bullshit."

"The animals will find them, if we don't first," Jake said, casting pity on the disembodied head as one of the men slipped on latex and rewrapped the green bag around it.

"Who was he?" the commander asked.

"I don't know. They have coffinite. That's sixty-one percent uranium."

"You need twenty-five K-G to build a bomb, Jake. A backpack-worth's not enough."

"You risk my fucking life for a pile of rocks?" Jake accused.

The rotors stopped. The commander studied Jake.

"A backpack here, a backpack there. Pretty soon, they've got enough." The commander stated the obvious.

Jake shook his head, feeling his Cubs hat. He took it off and looked at it.

"Sometimes, I forget which parts of me are real and which you make up," Jake said.

"*You* make it up, Jake."

Jake nodded. What the commander said was true. There was only the duty he owed to himself. He couldn't afford to just be right with the world. He had to be right with himself.

"Did they suspect you, Jake?"

"I didn't even suspect me. I never let the side of me that guides down here full time know about the small black hole that does the dirty work for you part time."

"That's why you're the best."

"Was. You'll find the other one buried up trail. Just look for the ravens."

He tossed the daypack full of cash into the commander's chest. He scanned for his camelback. He slipped it on and headed back west along the creek.

"Where you think you're goin'?" the commander asked.

Jake turned and faced him.

"To see my brother," he explained, then headed toward Bright Angel Canyon.

If he filled up at Bright Angel, he had enough water to make it all the way back to the South Rim without stopping.

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