

"All the Snake Handlers I Know are Dead"

by Dennis Danvers

"All the snake handlers I know are dead," he said with a little smile coiled up at the corner of his mouth.

What did I expect him to say? I had a snake problem. He was Jerry the local extension agent. "Are they endangered?" I asked, referring to the dozens of timber rattlers who lolled about my construction site.

"Not yet," he said. "Folks *do* kill 'em." He managed to sound concerned about that.

"Shotgun. Axe. Shovel. Poisons. You got dogs?"

"Yes." One.

"I wouldn't recommend poison, then. Do your dogs mess with 'em?"

"Not that I've noticed." Lucille's a rescue, afraid of everything but me.

"That's good. Snakebite can kill a dog. Make 'em swell up like a balloon."

"I'll keep that in mind." Lucille as a balloon dog was now indelibly imprinted in my mind, part of a whole slideshow of horrific images regularly provided me by concerned locals. At least this one didn't involve meth heads and chain saws.

"You the woman building the place on the mountain?"

They didn't say "crazy woman" but they might as well. "Yes," I said.

"Heard you were a carpenter."

"I worked some construction, framing out McMansions during the boom. I wouldn't say I'm a carpenter."

Jerry shook his head, the slightest bit—he might not even have been aware of. The crazy woman reflex response.

"I have a shotgun," I said. It seemed like a good time to bring that up. "I'll use that. On the snakes."

I'd heard his uncle Roger, a neighbor down the mountain, spoke of me affectionately as

“Maggie the Mountain Girl.” I suspected it was edited for my hearing. The word “crazy” was likely in there somewhere. I questioned whether Roger, thirty-five, really thought of me—shall we say thirty-nine or so?—as a “girl.”

Up on the mountain, my dog wasn't swollen or dying, but she was hiding in the thicket. She slunk out, trembling. Somebody had busted into my trailer, taken everything with cash value, which wasn't much—a laptop and the shotgun, as well as the shells. A clock radio I bought at a yard sale for two dollars. They somehow missed the five-dollar boom box and the shoebox of CDs the guy threw in with it. “C'mon,” I said to my still-trembling protector. “You're going with me back to town.”

I didn't blame Lucille for being a useless watch dog. She weighed thirty pounds. She had a slender collie snout. What was she supposed to do, nip them to death? Besides, she was a rescue. Some crazy woman who was keeping forty-six dogs in her house, died with them inside. Lucille was one of three survivors. If there's a place to hide, she *will* find it. But one other thing about Lucille, besides the hiding and the trembling and the slinking—don't *ever* back her into a corner.

I went to the pawn shop in Lorton instead of the cheaper Walmart another ten miles down the road because I figured the word would travel faster from Sam's Pawn that the crazy bitch was now heavily armed. I'd had it. City neighborhoods had nothing on this place, only there you could call 911. Last week someone stole my mailbox. Who steals a mailbox?

I replaced my shotgun and bought a .38 with a holster, so I could have it with me at the work site. Sam Jr. asked me about ammo, what I intended to use the guns for. “Rattlers and meth heads,” I said.

He smiled. “I'll fix you right up.”

So there I was early next morning with my sidearm and my shotgun and my shovel and my scaredy-cat dog, trying to decide how I was going to start this war. I counted at least a couple

dozen dozing rattlers. It was easy to mistake them for piles of rocks. They were pretty drowsed out this time of morning. I didn't know if that was to my advantage or not.

Were they more likely to totally nut out—or simply skedaddle—when awakened from a sound sleep by the sound of lethal force?

I played it out in my imagination: Lucille and I swarmed with crazed unstoppable snakes, sinking their fangs deep, injecting us with agonizing, gruesomely lethal venom. It made a strong impression, even before we started swelling and writhing in torment, so I decided to proceed with caution and trembling. That's how I ended up here, I suppose—going on anyway, taking the chance, facing my fears, with my bright, blind eyes and my stubborn little heart.

Lucille would prefer to slink back to the trailer if I didn't mind.

"I said *stay*, goddammit!" She sat her reluctant butt down and glanced over her shoulder, then back at me, her equivalent of the crazy-woman reflex. Oh, pup of little faith—but she was incredibly obedient. I thought it better not to think too much about why. She wasn't out here to serve the cause, whatever it was. She was out here because I'd saved her life. What kind of life was now up to me. I wouldn't blame her if she wasn't just a little disappointed with her country paradise, though she did seem to adore me. I wasn't the least disappointed with her.

The snakes, I told her—just let me deal with these snakes, and we'll be living in paradise like I promised when I sprang you from the cage you'd been living in too long, remembering hell.

My first battle plan was to deploy the shovel with .38 backup in a systematic sweep of the target area, but that didn't play so good in my head: Prod, swing, miss, trip, tangle, shoot foot, get bit repeatedly, swell up like a balloon animal, *die*. Repeat in random order, always ending with *die*. I had trouble getting it to stop.

The shotgun—swift, overwhelming force deployed beyond striking distance—seemed like the way to go. Blow them away. *Kaboom! Kaboom!* Repeat as needed if they were too stupid to slither away and stay gone. I'd tried banging pots and pans and yelling, and was rattled at for my troubles. Scariest noise I ever heard—first one, then another, and another . . .

There were hundreds of acres in all directions to lounge around besides where I was trying to build my crazy house. Every crazy woman needs a crazy house, right? You wouldn't want us living around normal folk, would you? If I couldn't overcome a passel of venomous serpents, then maybe I wasn't as crazy as I thought I was, and I'd have to come down off the mountain, and the Mountain Girl just couldn't do that. So it was me or the snakes. A hell of a lot of snakes, and there seemed to be more of them all the time.

Just the day before, I straightened up from swinging a pick to mop my brow, and there was one of them inches from my face. I wasn't sure how I jumped out of that hole, but the damn rattle sound was right behind me. Don't give me that it-was-probably-as-scared-as-you stuff, because I don't see how that was possible, and while that rattler slept just fine afterwards, it kept showing up in my dreams, keeping me up all night. I was scared again just thinking about it.

I knew they were only indigenous reptiles who meant me no harm if I'd just leave them alone, but I'd put too many hours in on this site since last fall to move now. If I couldn't work in the heat of summer, it was another winter in the trailer playing solitaire with Lucille, the site buried in snow. I couldn't wimp out. I just couldn't. I pumped a round into the chamber and raised the gun.

Folks do kill 'em.

But they were asleep. That didn't seem right. "Hey, snakes! Wake up! Time to die!" The valley echoed with this nonsense.

Nothing. Except Lucille's little whimper behind me. I expected her to have slunk halfway back to the trailer by now. I thought it best to ignore her. Then a voice as smooth as supple leather said, "You the woman looking for a snake handler?"

I turned around, and he was all tall, skinny shadow, the morning sun at his back. The building site faced the summer sunrise. He raised his hands, and I lowered the gun. I didn't know if I was more surprised by his sneaking up on me so silently or by Lucille sitting beside him wagging her tail along the ground, like *meet my new friend*. Lucille wasn't unfriendly, but she

generally had to hide a while before she got to know you. He scratched the top of her head. “Nice dog,” he said to me. “Good girl,” he said to her. Lucille practically wet herself.

I stepped to the side, so I could get a better look at him without the sun in my eyes. “Thanks. She likes you. Snake handler—is that what you are?” His eyes were the color of pale jade. He wore a black T-shirt and black jeans, black boots, and a long-tail brown coat like a character in a western movie. His dark grizzled hair hung down his back in a thick braid. He was clean-shaven and sun-beaten.

“You might say that,” he said with a modest little bob of the head, like he was a handler and so much more. He had a comforting presence, as if everything was happening a little slower for him.

Which wasn’t hard, compared to me. “Then you can see my problem.” I swept my hand across the snake-infested site.

He smiled. “What you got here is a fine nursery.”

He walked over to the closest of the snoozing rattlers and scratched it on the back of the head like he’d done Lucille, waking it up. “Hey girl,” he cooed, and the big brutal-looking head swayed back and forth, and I thought, here it comes, another crazy dead man to bury, when the damn snake coiled up his arm, all the way up, till the two of them were eye to eye like lovers looking for a room. He walked over to the other end of the site and put his hand down on a likely-looking spot, and the snake slithered off his arm and coiled into a contented pile. He blew it a kiss. I just stood there with my mouth hanging open. Mountain Girl was certain this wasn’t normal rattlesnake behavior.

“You’ve exposed all this rock to the sun. All these pregnant females love that, as you can imagine.” He ran his fingertips up and down his skinny torso like everybody knows what it’s like to carry a load of tiny timbers inside.

“Oh.” Pregnant females. I felt ashamed. Mountain Girl was about to blow away a hillside of pregnant snakes like some crazy woman because they were in my way. The sheer lunacy of the

whole enterprise came over me like it did several times a day, but much worse than usual. That shame is some nasty stuff. It's easy to be a fool.

He looked deeply concerned about our plight—me and Lucille and the snakes—offered the gentle voice of reason. “If you try to chase them off, they’ll just come back. It’s just too good a spot. They’re too far along. I suggest you work on one side of the site, and let them hang out on the other—then switch. There’s plenty of room. Will that work for you?”

Crazy woman, meet crazy man. “I—I guess so.”

“Good then. Where you want to work first?”

“Well—I’m working in the southwest corner. Over there. I could keep working that side.”

“Good, then. How about I just move those four girls there, and that little one? How about her? Is she okay?” He was pointing out snakes as casual as can be, walking among them. They all seemed to be waking up now. Watching him. You could see their little heads tracking him, sense the excitement in the air. He was something to behold. Lucille was riveted, too, sitting right up next to me, watching him tote around rattlers like they were kittens. Lucille was even afraid of kittens. Hid from them.

I wanted to tell him I didn’t have a working phone, so if he got bit, it was a bad long trip off the mountain to anything resembling a hospital, but I just played along like he wasn’t crazy, and sure enough he moved eleven more snakes like the first one. The little one rattled at him, and he laughed. “I don’t have time for your silliness. Get up here.” Zip. There it went, like the others, up his arm, and then, I swear to God, they rubbed noses before he put it—her—down.

“And they’ll just stay over there?” I asked when he was done, and there was a clear boundary. One side had a couple dozen more or less, I kept losing count, but the other was snakeless.

“Long as you’re working over here, the girls will be happy.” He looked around. “Looks like you got plenty to keep you busy for a while. Just you working, right?”

“How much do I owe you?”

He smiled a little smile, bobbed his head. Message received. “Oh, nothing. I don’t do this for money. I do it for them.” He looked over at the girls, as he called them, glanced significantly at my shotgun, the intended murder weapon.

“What happens when I’m done on this side?”

“Then I’ll move ’em all over here, and you can work over there. Unless it’s gotten cold by then. They’ll be looking for a place to den.”

“It’ll still be plenty hot, believe me. How do I get in touch with you?”

“I’ll keep an eye out.”

From where we were standing, there’s an incredible panoramic vista. That’s why the house had been laid out here—for the view. Now I realized, from every point I could see, somebody might be looking back at me, watching. “I—I’m not comfortable with that arrangement.”

I expected him to get pissy at that point, but he was all apologetic. “Course not. You don’t need me involved—keep it amongst yourselves, better for everybody that way. I tell you what. When you want them to move, take a day off. Show up at the site, so they don’t think you’re sick, but don’t work, move the picks and shovels maybe. They’ll get the message. Take the dog swimming, give them time to get situated. They should all be squared away next morning so you can start busting rock over there.” He smiled, pleased with his solution.

New levels of craziness. Delusional. And I was listening to him, while Lucille couldn’t get enough of his pets like she’d known him her whole life, which I guess is one of the reasons I listened, that and the stunt he just pulled with a dozen rattlers. “What if they don’t get the hint? Seems . . . uh . . . pretty sophisticated for a bunch of snakes.”

“Maybe so. I’ll explain it to ’em ’fore I leave, answer any questions.” He grinned. I knew he was crazy—not like me and the meth heads or my dead husband—beyond crazy, comfortable with it, positively tranquil, but he wasn’t joking. Tranquil as he was, there was an urgency to his mission, a reason these snakes adored him: The feeling was mutual. “Handler” didn’t begin to describe this guy.

He did a little promenade through his snake harem again, touching this one and that. They were bobbing around, like they were reaching out: *Touch me! Touch me!* Then he walked away up the hillside into the National Forest, and the snakes all watched him go. I say walked, but it wasn't like that, the way he moved, effortlessly, as if he weren't slogging up a steep rocky incline. The tails of his coat switched back and forth as his long legs stretched and his hips swayed. When he was up near the ridgetop, he turned and waved, and I waved back. Then he shook both hands in the air, and the snakes rattled their tails all together. The noise was deafening, echoing down the valley, then, as it faded away, came his laughter, as I ran back to my trailer and hid out with Lucille, who had a lot of explaining to do. How come the scariest man I ever met didn't scare her? She couldn't explain it, though I talked of little else all night.

Unlike Lucille, I was plenty scared of him, but I had other feelings to explain, though it wasn't hard, as handsome as he was, the darling of all those snakes.

Name. How in the hell was it I didn't even get his name? Rumplesnakeskin maybe? It occurred to me that what I really needed was some independent verification of his reality.

I had it the next morning, of a sort. The snakes were all on the other side of the site and seemed perfectly content to stay there, just like he said. I hoped they didn't mind music. I loaded up the boom box with batteries and played Talking Heads and Warren Zevon and busted rock all day. I made more headway than I had in weeks, since I wasn't looking over my shoulder for rattlers every few minutes. Lucille even hung out with me. Maybe she was afraid the meth heads would show up at the trailer again, or maybe she was hoping the snake handler would show up at the site. She licked my blisters when I took water breaks and kept me company.

After a productive week, I went into town for dog food and wine and other staples, and ran into Jerry at Food City. "Thanks for sending that snake handler my way. He's something. Problem solved."

He had no idea who I was talking about. Swore he hadn't spoken of our conversation with anyone. "Like I told you," he insisted, "all the snake handlers I know are dead."

For some reason, standing next to the display of strawberry pies, I didn't feel like telling Jerry the details of what had happened, how all of a sudden, this nameless stranger had negotiated a deal with the rattlers, a deal that had persisted for a week. Too crazy.

"He said they're pregnant females," I said.

He nodded. "Makes sense." He didn't seem to care much. "Hope it works out for you." He left with a strawberry pie. I resisted.

On the mountaintop, there was a full moon, and I walked with Lucille to the work site. The pale rock still radiated heat from the hot day and seemed to glow in the moonlight. I loved this place. So did Lucille, at times like these. Mostly white, she looked like a ghost dog, racing around the clearing.

Then she froze, looked up toward the ridge. I followed her gaze. A dark shape wove a sinuous path through the moon-bleached wood. I tried to imagine what would move like that, too fluid for a deer or a person—maybe a bear. There were plenty around.

I followed the snake handler's instructions to the letter when I was ready to make the move, showing up without working, telling the girls (what I called them by this time) that they were welcome to relocate back to their old quarters, substantially quarried just to suit them, moved a few tools, then I took the dog swimming and left them to it.

Our swimming spot was high on the mountain where the stream was just getting started, and the hardwoods that used to shelter it had been hauled away and sold before I ever saw the place. I'd hacked a path through the greenbrier last spring, so it only took a little work with the machete to get us there again, Lucille slinking along behind, knowing it was worth this nerve-jarring *thwack, thwack*. There were cascades, a small pool, a large, flat sun-baked rock, and a ball.

Lucille churned tirelessly about the chilly pool in pursuit of the ball, returning it with a shake and a silent plea for more. Until she finally found a spot on the hot stone, shook furiously, and flopped down, happily exhausted. A steamy cloud rose from her heaving side.

I went in, too, and that was wonderful, cold as the water was. I had a tiny little bucket I bathed with in the trailer. I was proud of that frugal bucket, but I had stone dust so deep in my hair and flesh you could stick me in a park and call me a statue. I washed and scrubbed and scoured, planted my face in some white water and let the stream cleanse me, numb the heat of busting rock in the summer sun from my exhausted body and wash it downstream. I sat up in the water laughing, tingling all over, then lay on a warm rock and let the hot sun dry me, let Lucille lick my face.

That night he showed up in my dreams. I was sitting at the kitchen table in my old place in the city having a cup of coffee, reading a letter. I knew which letter. It was always the same letter. How many do you get anymore? These days? Real letters. Saying good-bye.

The snake handler walked into that dream kitchen as if he belonged there and took the other chair. There was a second coffee on the table, and he thanked me for it and took a swallow, then drank it down. He looked the same, the same clothes as up on the mountaintop. I looked out the kitchen window, but there was nothing. I didn't live there anymore. Lucille, who'd never lived there, thumped her tail under the table as the snake handler stroked her head, resting on his knee.

"That's why you're up on the mountaintop, isn't it?" he asked, nodding at the letter in my hands as if he knew what was in it.

"Don't be ridiculous. Who throws her life away over a silly letter?"

He thought about it a moment, stroked his smooth chin. "A crazy woman?"

Not him, too. I stood and picked up my empty coffee cup, reached for his. He took my forearm. "I meant it as a compliment." His other hand abandoned Lucille's head, and the buttons of my blouse seemed to fall open at his touch. I dropped the cups on the table, and I knew I was

dreaming because Lucille didn't skitter off in a panic but just kept thumping as the snake handler pressed his mouth and tongue to my stomach, under my breasts, the base of my neck, my mouth. I let myself get lost in his kiss. Our kiss.

When I was trembling with passion, he journeyed back down my body, slowly, lovingly, until he found my wet vagina with his tongue, and I could feel an orgasm stirring, insistent, and I hoped the dream wouldn't end before I came. I didn't have to worry about that. My head thrown back, I screamed a blasphemous prayer. Then his tongue seemed to grow, filling me up, and I looked down to see him slither into me, a great serpent moving inside of me.

What does it say about me that I still didn't want the dream to end?

Next morning, waking with the birds, I didn't mind the afterglow, either.

Let's just say it had been a while.

As I walked down to the site, I knew what I'd find, and I didn't know at the same time. I believed I had a genuine miracle going on, and I didn't. The fact that I'd had the best kinky dream sex of my life with him hadn't exactly clarified matters. I believed, and I didn't. Then it was settled. It was just like he said. Every last snake had moved.

I'd believed half a miracle okay. You learn to live with a little strange. The whole thing made my knees wobble. Lucille quickly curled up in a comfortable spot where only yesterday a pregnant rattler had coiled, cooking her litter. Did the snake handler tell Lucille something, too? Maybe he should've explained it a little better to me. The snakes moved because I asked them to. After he explained it to them. This was a little more than staying put. I couldn't look at them in quite the same way. I couldn't look at *anything* in quite the same way.

Sometimes that isn't such a bad thing. Wasn't that why Mountain Girl was up here to begin with? To get a different view? To find out who she was? Sometimes you find out more than just that.

I went to work.

I hadn't been at it long, just enough to work up a good sweat in the comfortably chilly morning air, when I felt a presence behind me. I knew it wasn't one of the girls. I had faith in them by this time. I turned, and it was him, the snake handler, sitting cross-legged by the hole I was in. How did he do that? Lucille couldn't contain herself, wagging her tail and licking his face. I knew how she felt. "So I guess you've been keeping an eye out, after all," I said.

"You might say that. Glad to see how well it's worked out for all concerned." He grinned again, only this time there was a little more something in it. He was glad to see me too. I wondered what his dreams were like.

"You want a cup of coffee?" I asked. I owed the man a lot. The least I could do was show a little hospitality.

"I don't want to keep you from your work," he said, looking into my eyes in a way that said he did.

I went with the eyes. "Don't be silly. I'll throw in a stale donut."

"You got yourself a deal." He gave me his hand and pulled me out as if I weighed nothing, and I was thinking, maybe this isn't such a good idea, but the crazy don't always listen to reason when other voices beckon. Lucille's, for example, who was yipping and twirling in her *oh, joy!* dance I thought she only did for me.

We sat beside the Airstream in aluminum folding chairs. I made sure he got the good one. His name was Colson Hand. I told him I liked the sound of it. I felt like a girl on a date. I had decidedly mixed feelings about that. He wasn't helping. He was a good listener. I was a prattler. I talked about the place, the wildlife, how much I loved the beauty of it.

Then he slipped in a question. "What about the solitude?"

That wasn't fair. Not between those jade eyes and my dreams. "You want some more coffee?"

"No thanks. I'm good."

He didn't call me on not answering his question. That was nice. So I called myself. "My counselor once told me—I had a counselor for a while—that there's no point avoiding a question because by avoiding it you just give away the answer anyway. The solitude's the hardest part."

"I can imagine. Why do you do it?"

"Why am I crazy?"

"I don't think you're crazy wanting to live alone on a mountaintop, if it's what you want to do."

"That's the question, isn't it? I must want to. Since I'm doing it, and it's no day at the beach. That's what I tell myself anyway. Somebody told me once I didn't really want it, living here. There's a bit of prove him wrong in it, I suppose. I'm never sure how much."

He bobbed his head. He seemed to appreciate the confession of uncertainty. That's all it took. I was starved for that. Only the truly crazy are certain. I told him the whole story.

Living on the mountain or somewhere like it was my husband's dream. It began to grow on him, get serious, central. It's all he talked about. It was contagious. It began to grow on me, too. We might be living in a dumpy suburban rent house now, working jobs we hated, but someday we'd be in splendor. We probably didn't compare our ideas of splendor often enough, or what we planned to do with it when we found it. We were too busy squirreling away money, working extra hours, extra jobs, visiting every remote plot of wilderness for sale within range of our old Saturn. I loved being in these wild places. A city girl, it was all new to me. It was easy for me to believe it was magical. It might as well have been Narnia or Oz.

For him it became like a cause that enraged him—rescuing the land from the rapacious evil of the modern world. I wanted to rescue it, too, but not to be angry, more to escape anger if I could, others' and my own. All the disappointments we collect, as if the world was just made for us, and it hasn't got much time to get its act together. Even a total sense of failure is humbled by a mountain sky at night. A little peace and quiet to notice where you are. I could *do* this—live up

here—I wanted to. That kept me going through everything else.

Then, for my husband, it seemed to be more about him and less about the land, but still plenty angry—raging. He would discover new insights on the mountain with the help of the weirder and weirder texts he grew effusive about, then protective of, when I presumed to question them. He made no sense at all when he spoke of these things, though he still seemed the same man. At Thanksgiving he got into it with his sister's husband, and we were asked to stay away Christmas. Meanwhile, the dream ground on under its own momentum, so that when the perfect mountaintop property came up—cheap, isolated, and beautiful—we bought. We had to. I've never stood in line for Space Mountain, but plenty of people do. You stand in line long enough, you're *going* to ride the ride. I'd stood in line years for this place, forgoing all others.

I had this crazy idea that once we had the land, he wouldn't be crazy anymore.

The plan had been to build a house here, live here, and let the logged forest return to its natural splendor, but the land itself had taken all our money, so we must labor on, which we both did, even taking jobs apart from one another, camping up here a few times, laying out the site, quite a bit larger than the current configuration, large enough for his craziness and mine. There was plenty of splendor to go around.

Then I got a letter, saying he'd met someone, and that she understood him and what he was looking for like I never had. He went on to say I never believed in the land or him anyway, and as far as he was concerned the land was mine now to sell as my half of whatever I thought I had coming. He made it sound like the whole thing had been ruined for him by my lack of faith in him and his *core beliefs*. I never knew him to use the phrase *core beliefs* before. He used it three times. Tap, tap, tap. Stake through the heart.

On the way to a shaman in New Mexico he and the twenty-two-year-old woman who understood him died in a head-on in the Texas Panhandle. I flew to Amarillo to bury him in the bleakest, cheapest cemetery I could find, then sold everything I had, borrowed the Airstream, called in every favor a poor wheedling widow could manage, and came up here. There was a life

insurance policy with a big accidental death payoff. She'd been behind the wheel, so there'd been no question of suicide. He hadn't changed the beneficiary.

I thought I should have a dog, to keep me company and for protection, so I adopted Lucille, who's about three times braver now than she used to be—and who loves me dearly.

“Sometimes I think I like having someone around more scared than me.” Lucille was under the trailer, watching us, wagging her tail at the mention of her name.

“Don't be scared,” Colson said softly, like he could do something about all the dangers that were everywhere, and I looked into his eyes like I believed him.

I kissed him. I'm not sure how his face had gotten so close. “I'm sorry,” I whispered. He kissed me. I said, “My bed is awful, like an old sock and about as big.”

He laughed, looking into my eyes. He found me adorable. Adorable had been a very long while indeed. He squinted at the sun as if calculating its rate of ascent. “Let's go for a swim, then. Should be nice.”

And that's how we ended up twined together, making love on the same warm rock by the spring-fed stream. He was incredibly powerful, strong but never rough, sensuous, passionate, unafraid to look me in the eye. I came luxuriously, as if the dream were mere rehearsal. I fell asleep wrapped up in his arms, woke upon the rock, alone but for Lucille sprawled beside me dreaming. Maybe that was two of us. Maybe I really was crazy. I put my hand between my legs. No. I hadn't dreamed that part. So all of it was real.

“What about the solitude, Colson? It's terrible,” I murmured to the babbling stream.

And there he was, emerging from a narrow trail I swear to God hadn't been there yesterday. The pot growers must've found this spot. He was dressed in clean clothes, same as the other ones.

“I hoped to return before you woke.” He lay down beside me and took wet, naked me into his dry, clean embrace, and it felt delicious.

“You have a place close by?” I asked.

“In a manner of speaking. Let’s just say not everyone who lives in the forest does so legally.”

“You a farmer, Mr. Hand?”

“No. We manage to avoid one another.”

“Chemist?”

“They’re a bad lot. May they all blow themselves to hell. No. I’m unemployed. You could use a hand building the chimney and hearth. I know a thing or two about stone.”

Indeed.

So that’s how the summer went, how the place was built on time. Stone, lumber, sex, water—Colson twined around our lives, me and Lucille’s, like he was made to order, which would’ve made me wonder if I was dreaming except for this crazy-woman house growing out of the mountainside like it was Zeus’s head. That was real enough.

He never spent the night—said he had animals to tend to—swore he wasn’t married, didn’t seem at all crazy, though there was an undeniable reticence about his past. He’d always lived around here, he said. His family was no account. Times were hard. He lived in the forest. Seemed mean to press him when he clearly felt uncomfortable talking about it. Fair enough. I wasn’t crazy about discussing my dead husband either, and after I told Colson the story, he never revisited it to pick over the carcass. It was just the two of us on a mountaintop. Three, counting Lucille, who was definitely onboard. She adored him.

Okay. I’m not stupid. Alarm bells were ringing through that valley like a city on fire, but I chose to ignore them, as they say, was too busy competing with my own siren song. Best summer of my life. I was as hard as a rock and felt as beautiful as the clouds in the sky. I’d had my life burn down once. Least if it happened again, this time would be worth it.

Then the first cold snap on the mountain came along, and he was gone. I’d raced down to town and back with supplies before the worst of it hit. At least that was the plan. I skittered around on the

road on the way back up like an ice cube on a griddle. It took a few lucky breaks to make it up alive, only to wish I hadn't. The place was empty. I lit the first fire alone.

He'd built a recess by the hearth for firewood, had spent all morning splitting wood to fill it. I liked to watch the muscles in his back ripple as the axe rose and fell. *Thwack*. Dead on, every time. The log just fell open for him. *Thwack*. He knew. I said, "Leave some for tomorrow," and he didn't answer. He knew.

Lucille and I moped and cried in front of the hearth and wished we'd asked more questions. Or maybe it was better not to know.

The first freeze broke, and I made it back down the mountain for supplies. I didn't like leaving Lucille in the car, so I left her sleeping in the house. Naturally, Food City was crazy busy, the parking lot full. The checkout was a logjam of stuffed carts. People chatted with one another. I browsed a *People* and tried to keep a low profile. I hadn't been around this many people in a while.

An old guy in the next line leaned over toward me. "You're the lady building the house all by yourself on the mountain, ain't you?"

I didn't deny it. There was no place to run, no place to hide. I gave him a thin, dazed smile. I was in no mood.

"Looking real nice," he said. "I didn't believe you could do it all by yourself. You must have quite the view. I'm the other side of the ridge opposite. Amazing what you done. You must be strong as an ox."

"Thank you. Thank you very much. I had a lot of help though."

He cocked his head to one side, started to say, *I didn't see nobody*. At least that's what I thought he was about to say, what made a chill go up my spine, imagining him on the ridge opposite looking through a pair of binoculars. I'd never gotten that independent verification of Colson's reality I once thought might've been a good idea. This old fellow watched me build my house. All by myself.

“My name’s Maggie,” I said.

“Ted,” the old man said, smiling big and sweet like old men do for young women.

I wanted to ask him if he owned a pair of binoculars, but went right to the point instead.

“You ever hear of a fellow round here named Colson Hand?”

The smile fell down a well and stayed there. “No. Can’t say I have.” His line moved, and he disappeared behind the candy bars.

The woman behind me was looking at me fearfully. She’d obviously been tuned into my chat with Ted. I was getting a little tired of being treated like an alien being. “Have you got a problem?”

She was a big woman, her cart filled with high fructose corn syrup in its myriad forms, but her voice was soft and tiny, like a girl’s. I felt bad for snapping at her. “Colson Hand’s dead,” she said, and made a little frowny face like maybe I was the one who had the problem.

I didn’t try to get the story in the line at Food City, but when I was finally out of there I went to the library, waited for a computer, and checked it out. He and his wife had had a place up near mine in the National Forest. Neighbors found her dead, beaten up. The cops arrested Colson because he had a wild young man record, and his family was no account, like he said. For whatever reason, he didn’t like his chances and escaped from a couple of stupid deputies into the National Forest. An ice storm hit. The DNA evidence came back from the state showing Colson didn’t do it. They found his body in a little cave in the spring. A nest of snakes had fed upon his carcass, but DNA tests confirmed it was Colson. The deputies were later investigated for possible misconduct, but charges were dropped for lack of evidence. Wiley and Kincaid were the deputies’ names. Their pictures were in a row with Colson’s. They could’ve all gone to the same high school around here.

I stared at the screen. I didn’t like my choices here about the reality I’d been living in. Crazy? Dead lover? I wondered if I could build a whole house with a man who wasn’t there—if I could be reading things off this screen that the pixels didn’t show. Might as well head back up to

the mountaintop while it's still there, I thought. Lucille will be wondering where in hell I am.

I had a lot on my mind, all Colson. So when I saw the door was ajar, it made some kind of sense that it was him, and I ran inside. There were three of them. One of them had my .38. The shotgun was in the truck.

“Well, lookee here,” he said. “Get her bag.”

Forty dollars and a debit card wasn't exactly what they hoped for, especially since they probably figured the code I gave them wasn't actually going to open up the coffers of my vast wealth. Not even any prescription drugs. What kind of city girl doesn't have a few pills? They all seem wired enough already. They'd already finished off the last of my wine. There was a truckload of groceries, but they didn't think to look there. They were all dressed in hunter's togs from Walmart, but I doubted any of them were really hunters. I thought about the shotgun in the truck, whether I should mention the jug of wine there.

Then the one with the .38 tripped over Lucille's water dish. “Wha-the-fuck!”

For a moment I thought he was going to shoot it.

“You got a dog, lady?”

“Friends do. They're visiting. They must be out hiking.”

“Right. Nice try. On your knees, bitch.”

I thought it was a fairly pathetic try, but I needed to do something. They had a few years on them and someone had cleaned them up nice for their deputy pictures, but their mothers would know them, and I recognized them behind the hair and the stink. Two of the fellows were Wiley and Kincaid. Wiley had the .38. The third fellow might be his cousin or little brother.

“Put some wood on the fire,” Wiley told Little Wiley. “Let's warm this place up.”

Kincaid lit a cigarette and laughed, sat in front of the fire in my chair. He was higher than a buzzard, chuckling to himself over his plans for the evening.

Little Wiley stirred the coals and started building up a blaze. Everybody watched him

chucking on logs for a long night. Then he stopped, peered into the logs. “What the fuck? Her little pissant dog’s back up in there.”

“Well get him out,” Wiley said.

I started to say “I wouldn’t do that,” but I had a .38 pointed at my head.

Wiley reached in and grabbed, yanked his hand back bleeding, and I thought for a split second that would be the end of it. Lucille sprang from the woodpile, her charging collie legs churning, razor sharp teeth lunging and snapping at Little Wiley’s face in a fury that carried him back into Kincaid’s lap, and the three of them sprawled across the floor, Little Wiley screaming.

The gun swung from my face to Lucille, and I drove my fist into Wiley’s crotch, but he fired anyway, and I heard Lucille squeal in pain as the gun came back to me, between my eyes, but he didn’t fire. He cried out like a terrified child and leaped back against the wall, as they all sounded their rattles in deafening unison. I turned to the blazing hearth. They were everywhere, coiled in the firelight, still more slithering forth from the woodpile. My friends. The girls.

Wiley never fired a shot as the girls swarmed over my three visitors, killing them rather quickly. Colson held me in his arms and rocked me back and forth during the worst of it. Then he tended to Lucille’s wound, a nasty furrow in her back he treated with a salve, and pretty soon she was sleeping peacefully. I made coffee, and we repaired the door where my guests had crowbarred their way in. They did indeed start to swell, but they still fit behind the hearth, where the girls would drain them of any excess fluids they no longer had need of.

We brought in the groceries, and I made dinner, and we made love on the floor in front of the fire. “I must leave,” he whispered as the fire died down to embers, “but I’ll be back before you know it.”

And I’ll be waiting. And so it’s been with me and my dog, up here on the mountain for a number of years now. Best years of my life. Folks say we hardly seem to age, me and Lucille. The crazy can be that way, you know, seem to defy time and logic. Don’t let it frighten you. Not half the stories you hear about me are true.

It's wintertime. Lucille likes to lie before the hearth, the fire blazing, waiting for the thaw of spring. She's dreaming of long walks in the woods with me and Colson, swimming in the stream of life at its source. Or maybe she's just dreaming about a ball bouncing through paradise forever, snakes with rattles in their mouths rolling along like wheels, fearless Lucille racing alongside.

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