

Silver Falls

Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

Jerrel Dulay

Chapter XI

Fort contorted his arm at an inhuman angle as he struggled to torque a toothpick between his teeth. The shadow of trees cast by the morning sun flickered through Dodger's truck windows with hypnotic rhythm. From Fort's peripheral vision, he could see Dodger trying to hide laughter that had been welling up since they left the diner.

"Alright, what's so funny?" Fort accidentally snapped his toothpick with a startling crack.

"Nothing. How'd you like breakfast?" Dodger asked, shifting his smile to the side of his face that was out of Fort's line of sight.

"It was... really good. Thanks again for breakfast," Fort gritted his teeth.

"You ain't gonna hurt anyone's feelings here. Be honest," Dodger said casually as he flipped down his sun visor to look for something.

"Well, the food was really good. Most of it anyway. But that omelette. Sweet Kansas, it was like eating sandpaper!" Fort just about gagged as he recalled the taste.

"Did you see that fella I was talking to up at the counter? That's Nickelas Dollarbuck. You never order eggs if he's in the kitchen," Dodger retrieved a paper with scribbled

handwriting from his pocket and tucked it into the sun visor above his head.

“Wait, what? You knew that was gonna happen? Why didn’t you tell me?” Fort winced, obviously irritated.

“A man’s gotta fight his own battles and learn his own lessons,” Dodger muttered with the coolest ‘dad’ voice he could muster.

“I wish my dad thought like that. I’m twenty-six years old and he still tells me how to do everything as if I’m some kind of kid,” Fort shrugged, peering out the window as the truck pulled up to the familiar old wild west building of the Sheriff’s Office. Dodger flipped up his sun visor with his left hand, wincing as a dull pain shot through his knuckles. Fort pretended to not notice, watching the determined look on Dodger’s face to not express any kind of pain. “Hey, so what did you and Bjorna talk about anyway?”

“Nothing important,” Dodger muttered as he backed his truck into a parking space just in front of the Doctor’s Office.

“But you, Bjorna and Nickelas sure were talking for a while. Was it about Bull’s murder farm?” Fort asked, trying to read Dodger’s reaction. With a startling loud pop, a hand appeared on Fort’s window, causing him to just about jump out of his seat. Standing next to the truck, peering in with bloodshot eyes, wild hair and untamed moustache was Slim Roberts.

“Hey, Dodger, it’s me, Slim!” Slim said. His warbling, wiry voice was barely audible through the closed doors.

“Jeez, man! You scared me,” Fort opened his door and hopped out of the car.

“What’s up, Slim?” Dodger stepped out of his truck and lightly closed the door behind him before walking around to greet Slim.

“Hey, you busy today? I locked myself out of the house again last night,” Slim said sheepishly as he scratched his arm. Dodger gave Fort a focused expression before tilting his head toward the Doctor’s Office.

“Alright, Fort. You know what to do?” Dodger muttered.

“Yes, sir. Easier than Lemon Meringue Pie,” Fort nodded with a cool, distant look as he marched up to the steps to the Doctor’s Office. It had been years since he was last there. A nervous tension twisted up in his stomach as he opened the door and slowly stepped inside. Dodger and Slim’s voices discussing something faded into the background before the door slammed shut behind Fort. An overwhelming air of cleaning chemicals and stale air pushed Fort back against the closed door. No, he couldn’t afford to be afraid. He had a job to do. He had to be tough and help Dodger.

He limped forward practicing what kind of pain he would have in his stomach and what sort of expression he would have on his face as he reached the front desk. He greeted the receptionist who was on the phone. She nodded to him as he asked for Dr. Allergy. She furrowed her brow, preoccupied with someone yelling over the phone. With a flick of her wrist, she pointed to the door as if to shoo Fort away.

Fort shrugged and slowly inched the door open as he heard voices on the other side.

“So what do you think, Helen? Can it be fixed?” a man’s voice said.

“The insides look like burned toast. What did you do to this thing anyway?” a woman’s stern voice answered.

“I don’t know. Ask Bull Brandish, if you think you can make him talk. These things are very expensive, you know, but you can’t explain that to a guy like Bull,” the man said, sighing with frustration.

“I’ll take it back to my shed where I’ve got some spare parts. Just don’t cry if I can’t make it work,” the woman answered firmly.

“You’re an angel, Helen,” the man said.

“You need wings for that job,” the woman replied.

There was some sound of shuffling, prompting Fort to set his ear close to the door to try to catch any more of the conversation. With a sudden blinding flash of light, the door opened, slamming Fort square in the face. He yelped in pained surprise as he stumbled back, nearly falling to the ground.

“Oh! You poor baby! Are you alright?” the woman reached out and grabbed Fort’s arm to stop him from falling. He opened his eyes to see an impossibly beautiful face glowing with a radiant aura. Her golden, flowing, curled hair swirled around her face like clouds brushing against the top of a mountain. Was she a pop star from one the posters he used to hang on his walls as a teenager? No, she was far too elegant

and heavenly for that. Fort was entranced by an aroma of strawberries and rose petals as Helen put her hand around his shoulder. Her firm, supple breasts rubbed up against his arm. Did he just die? Was Helen an angel now carrying him up to heaven?

“Doc, this poor little thing was right behind the door when I opened it,” Helen said as she just about carried Fort right to Dr. Allergy.

“Hey, you alright there, guy?” Dr. Allergy asked, quickly clearing off the examination bed of hiking gear.

“I’m fine. I’m fine! Totally fine. I’ll be alright. It’s just a little bump,” Fort stumbled over his words, trying to not look like a wimp in front of such a beautiful lady.

“You poor little baby,” Helen said, embracing Fort closely and rubbing the side of his head. Fort closed his eyes, imagining himself falling in slow motion into a field of sweet flowers that smelled like the first day of summer.

“Helen, come on, stop teasing him,” Dr. Allergy gave Helen a stern expression after he noticed the growing smile on Fort’s face.

“Aw, you’re no fun, Doc,” Helen stepped back, leaving Fort shocked and alone. “Hey, fella, you’ll live, right?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s nothing to worry about. I’m fine!” Fort laughed as his head stopped spinning. His vision focused long enough for him to notice the desk with a map, some boxes, and a handgun. The doctor stood tall over Fort, trying to get a good look at Fort’s eyes.

“I’ll head out then. Give me a few hours and I’ll let you know how it goes,” in an instant, Helen’s voice shifted from that of a gentle mother to a soldier’s.

“I need to leave here at about 1 pm. Bull wants me to get there early today and I need to know if...” Dr. Allerdycy turned his back to Fort as he spoke with a hushed tone.

A fire ignited in Fort’s stomach. The doctor had moved out of the way and there was nothing standing between him and the map on the desk. No, he was too far. He could see a red circle drawn on the map, but he couldn’t see any words. He needed to get closer, but how could he walk over to the desk and not look suspicious. There was no time to waste. He had to do something.

With an unsteady lurch, Fort stood up and stumbled forward, putting his hand up to the side of his head where he was hit. One step. Then another. Then one more. He was there. He could see it. The Map.

“Whooooa! Goodness! My head,” Fort overacted as he threw himself toward the desk. Dr. Allerdycy grabbed Fort to stop him from falling, but Fort let his body go loose as he dropped himself squarely on top of the map. There, Fort could read the details that had eluded Dodger.

Angel Lake.

Pascagoula Meadow.

Starlight Rock.

Three points on the map surrounded the red circle on the map like a perfect triangle. Fort recognized the area,

having taken landscape photos in that general area just a few months ago. He had hiked along the trails there numerous times.

“Hey, don’t try to walk around. Come on and lie down on the table. I need to check for a concussion,” Dr. Allerdyce directed Fort onto a cold, hard table.

“Alright, I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Helen said as she picked up a bag of jangling electronic parts and left the room. As the doctor turned around to whisper something to Helen, Fort frantically scribbled something onto his palm with a pen he grabbed from the desk.

“Angel”

“Pasca”

“Star”

With only a second to spare, the doctor returned to Fort, lying on his back. Fort barely managed to slide the pen into his pocket. With a metallic click, Dr. Allerdyce shined a blinding light into Fort’s face. Fort’s eyes snapped shut with panic as his body stiffened, slamming hard against the metal table. Some strange, long, slender, inhuman memory reached out from deep within Fort’s mind, gripping him around his entire face.

“No! Don’t take me! I don’t want to go! Put me back on the ground!” the words shot out of Fort’s mouth utterly out of his control. Dr. Allerdyce stumbled back, wide eyed, dropping his flashlight pen to the ground with a terrifying slam. A hot, piercing tone filled his ears as he looked down at Fort, frozen in fear, staring up at the ceiling with wide eyes.

“What? What did you say?” Dr. Allerdyce stuttered, his heart pounding loud enough for Fort to hear. A tense moment melted away as Fort came to his senses, awakening from a dream.

“Huh? What happened? Where am I?” Fort asked calmly, as if he had only just entered the room.

“Hey, what was that just now? What did you just say?” Dr. Allerdyce demanded, stepping forward and gripping Fort’s arm tightly. For a moment, the doctor’s eyes locked on to a small filing cabinet tucked away in the darkest shadows of the corner of the room, sealed tight with a key only he had access to.

“What? I didn’t say anything,” Fort grabbed his head to stop it from spinning.

“You said something just now. What did you mean by that?” Dr. Allerdyce’s eyes grew red with tension as blood rushed to his head.

“Hey, I don’t know, man. I don’t even know where I am,” Fort complained, looking around the room. A heavy wind passed through the room as Dr. Allerdyce regained his composure. His eyes flicked left and right as a red hot air left his lungs.

“You hit your head just now. You better let me check to make sure you don’t have a concussion,” Dr. Allerdyce sighed.

“Whoa, no way. I thought I was just having breakfast at The Frying Saucer,” Fort said, watching stars spin all around him.

The doctor slipped his flashlight pen into his pocket as he gently set his hand on Fort's shoulder. Sparro felt a boiling fear rise from deep within his chest. This was not the first outburst he had seen from a patient. Especially over the last month, as more and more locals came to see him due to lack of sleep and reoccurring nightmares, he began to hear the cries of terror of his patients in his own dreams. Whatever Fort had just said, for whatever reason he said it, Sparro knew he was not alone.

Slim's long, gangly fingers jabbed at the buttons on the center console of Dodger's truck, intermittently missing their target. With each poke of a button and dull plastic click, another radio station of harsh static blared over the truck's speakers. Just as Slim put his hand up to shield his eyes from the morning light, Dodger turned onto a dirt driveway with a downward bump, causing Slim to slap to slam himself in the face.

"Dagnabbit!" Slim yelled.

"What are you doing?" Dodger squinted at Slim.

"The beats, man. Where's the music?" Slim frantically pushed at the radio buttons with increasing speed.

"Would you cut it out? It's obviously not working," Dodger glared, trying to figure out why Slim thought pushing more buttons would fix it.

"How can you live without music? A silent world is a cruel, cold one, man," Slim sighed, slapping his hand on the center console with defeat.

“It’s only been like that for two weeks. Anyway, we’re here at Fred’s place. I’ll only be a few minutes. Don’t touch anything,” Dodger sighed dryly, somehow knowing that Slim likely wouldn’t listen.

Dodger parked his truck next to Fred’s own truck in the gravel driveway. He stepped out and took in a deep breath to take in the aroma of juniper and sweet redwood, a distinct scent that always welcomed visitors to Fred’s property. To Dodger’s right, a pole proudly holding the American flag posed toward the sky. A perfectly maintained white picket fence lined the driveway, dotted with well trimmed bushes that looked to have been planted at perfectly equal distance from one to the next. Behind the picket fence, knee-high vegetable gardens carried a wide range of crops that seemed nearly ready to pick. Far behind the picket fence, Dodger stared down a stubborn old oak tree, remembering the pain of falling out of it when he was still a kid. He remembered Mary trying to nurse him while Fred told him to just walk it off.

A gentle wind blew, brushing against the top of the redwood trees, giving way for the sunlight to tap Dodger on the shoulder. A familiar resounding knock called for Dodger’s attention. He turned around to see the silhouette of a seated figure swinging a log splitting axe down onto a round of firewood. Was that Fred? Why was he sitting down? Had he hurt himself recently?

“Oops, I missed!” a young but warm sounding female voice giggled. No, that couldn’t be Fred. Dodger walked around the side of the garage to see a young woman who couldn’t be more than 17 years old adjusting her position in a wheelchair. She leaned forward to adjust the round of

firewood she had missed and knocked over, preparing to hit it once again. A bead of sweat rolled down her forehead as she gritted with determination. Her soft, innocent face contrasted the rusted old axe as she raised it close to her face. The muscles on her shoulders and arms flexed like that of an Olympic athlete as she tensed up.

Snap!

She brought the axe down just off center on the round of wood, managing to split it all the way through. She used the axe to push the chopped wood off to the side. As she reached for the next round of wood to split, a large brown and white feather fell off of a shiny ornament that accented her jet black hair.

“Oh no, my feather!” she gasped.

“Let me get that for you,” Dodger said, wide eyed, trying to understand why this somewhat small girl was splitting wood. He reached down behind the wheelchair and picked up the feather, handing it to the girl with a smile.

“Thanks, mister,” she beamed at Dodger as she wiped the sweat from her forehead using the back of her weight lifting gloves.

“I’m Dodger. Nice to meet ya,” he said, unable to hide the look of bewilderment on his face as his mind scrambled to understand the situation.

“I’m Kathelynn. It’s so neat to meet you, Dodger,” the young lady grinned as she extended her hand forward. Dodger expected to meet the firm, tight handshake of the gruffest lumberjack, but instead, her handshake was delicate and light,

almost light picking up a feather. Kathelynn tucked her feather into a storage bag stored beneath her wheelchair as she muttered, "I'll fix this later."

"So, uh, what's up? Isn't Fred here to help you split this wood?" Dodger tried his best to navigate a minefield of words, worried he might say something to offend the young lady.

"Oh, Mr. and Mrs. Hardluck hired me to split this firewood. I can do half a cord in a day of work! Well, I usually just help out older folks who have a hard time splitting wood on their own. I didn't really want to be paid for this but I lost a couple cross bow bolts during practice this week and Fred said he'd pay me \$100. That's crazy! I can't believe how much money that is!" Kathelynn's face animated with the look of an excited child as the entire world reflected from her clear, bright eyes.

Dodger's jaw dropped as he tried to process what Kathelynn was saying. He kept his mouth shut to avoid bringing up the wheelchair. Just as he struggled to think of something to say, a set of hurried footsteps came clomping up behind him.

"Slim!" Kathelynn clapped her hands as a great big smile appeared on her face.

"Heeey! Little sniper! Looks like you're hard at work, young lady!" Slim grinned as he skidded to a stop and held his hand up in the air. Kathelynn leaned forward and slapped Slim's hand with a clean high five.

“Fancy seeing you here, Slim!” Kathelynn laughed as she released the brakes on her wheelchair to turn herself around.

“Dodger and I are headed up to the gun shop. I gotta grab my spare house keys from Shellaby. I locked myself out of my house,” Slim’s shoulders slumped.

“You locked yourself out... *again!*?” Kathelynn gasped, more out of disbelief than surprise.

“Haha, yeah, I don’t know what happened. I had to sleep out on the front porch again. It’s not as bad as it sounds. It’s been a whole three weeks since the last time it happened so in my book, I consider that a victory,” Slim laughed, seemingly unaware of the concept of shame. Dodger stopped just short of slapping his open palm onto his face.

“Clementine said we can do a bonfire tonight. Can you tell me more scary stories later?” Kathlynn asked, her eyes shimmering with the sparkle of adventure.

“You bet your bottom dollar, little lady. I got more campfire stories than you can shake a stick at,” Slim bragged as he stuck his chest out proudly.

Another set of footsteps on the gravel came up behind Dodger, this time lighter and slower. Dodger turned around to see a lady in her late 70s with dark circles under her eyes. The color in her hair seemed more pale than usual. A determined smile on her face fought back against the lack of sleep she had been facing over the past few weeks.

“Bless my stars, look at these two handsome boys that suddenly appeared in our yard,” Mary smiled as she nodded

to Dodger and Slim. In her hand, she held a big glass of iced tea. "Here, deary. You've been working so hard. Make sure to stay hydrated."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hardluck!" Kathelynn took the glass, trying to steady her arms which were trembling with some degree of fatigue. Dodger could not help but notice how hard the young woman had been pushing herself, especially at so early in the day. He wanted to offer to help but knew that would be wrong somehow.

"Mornin', Mary!" Slim greeted with a wave of his hand.

"Good morning, Mary. How have you been?" Dodger nodded to Mary then looked down at the tinfoil wrapped cookies in his hand.

"Just peachy, Dodger. I just finished preparing a batch of oranges for marmalade. You'll have to come back when it's ready," Mary smiled, the corners of her mouth trembling as she held a smile. The veneer of normalcy was thin enough for Dodger to see something just below the surface. For a fraction of a second, her eyes darted to the corners of her peripheral vision to look at Kathelynn, then Slim.

"Sounds good. I came by to see Fred and drop these cookies off for him. They're from Moss, of course," Dodger said, giving Mary a concerned look.

"Oh, Fred's not here at the moment, but I'll let him know you stopped by and left these for him," Mary said, her face becoming red for some reason. Dodger's brow furrowed as he turned his head to look at Fred's truck still in the driveway; a gesture which Mary clearly noticed.

“Would you boys like to come in for an iced tea?” Mary asked, trying to hide the fact that she was wringing her hands.

“Yes please!” Slim clapped his hands together.

“No, that’s alright, but thank you. How about next time when that marmalade is ready? Slim and I have to run,” Dodger said, making unbreaking eye contact with Mary.

“Yes, alright. That would be nice,” Mary answered apprehensively. She wearily walked back around the garage toward the front door. Dodger saw that Slim and Kathelynn had started a conversation about a movie or TV show or something and quickly turned to follow Mary, reaching her just as she approached the front door.

“Hey, Mary, is everything alright?” Dodger asked softly, setting his hand lightly on Mary’s elbow. She turned to face him, struggling to keep the smile on her face from cracking.

“It’s... it’s just...” Mary surveyed her surroundings, making certain there was no one else within earshot. “Fred’s been having those nightmares again. You know. Those old nightmares. We’re waking up at two, three, four in the morning. He’s screaming. He calls out my name, and Winnie, and your name. He wakes up in tears. It’s... just hard to get back to sleep after that, you know?” Mary just about collapsed onto Dodger’s shoulder. All he could do was listen. What was he supposed to say in response to that?

“I’m sorry. Has he talked to Sparro about it?” Dodger softly whispered, checking his peripheral vision to see if Slim was walking back yet.

“You know what Fred is like. He doesn’t want anyone to know about it. And don’t you dare breathe a word of it. I didn’t tell you nothin’ about it, you hear?” Mary sighed deeply, dropping a great weight that had been sitting on her shoulders. After a deep breath, she regained her composure.

“Yes ma’am. Not a word. Now, do you know where he went today?” Dodger asked, his heart skipping a beat.

“No, he didn’t say. Just suddenly said he was heading out,” Winnie wiped her watery eyes with a flowery handkerchief.

“Well, you take care of yourself. Get some rest when you can. Call me when that marmalade is ready,” Dodger gave Winnie a reassuring smile.

“You’re such a good man. You look after yourself and send my love to Karol,” Winnie smiled, taking a clear breath of fresh air for the first time in days.

“I will. See you again soon,” Dodger turned around and walked back around the side of the garage to find Slim making a funny face, eliciting a clapping and giggling from Kathelynn.

“Alright. It’s time we head out, Slim,” Dodger said.

“Oh, right, gotcha. Okay, little sniper. We’ll see you at the bonfire tonight,” Slim put his hands in the air like he was some kind of monster from a campfire story.

“Hey, Dodger, will you be at the bonfire tonight too?” Kathelynn asked, catching Dodger off guard.

“Oh, uh- I don’t know. Maybe,” Dodger stuttered, having not planned that far ahead.

“Oh, aww. Slim said you’re like the coolest guy ever. I hope you’ll be there. Anyway, it was nice to meet you,” Kathelynn readjusted her weight lifting gloves and picked up the axe. Dodger blushed, trying to not look back toward Slim. After a moment, he stepped closer to Kathelynn who was already preparing to attack the next round of wood.

“Can I offer a quick tip?” Dodger asked, pointing to the axe in Kathelynn’s hand.

“Sure, I’d appreciate that,” Kathelynn answered, looking up to Dodger.

“You’re doing a good job. You’ve got plenty of punch where it matters, so you don’t really need to hold the axe so low on the handle. Choke up on the handle, here, higher up and you’ll have a lot more control over your swing,” Dodger instructed, hearing the echo of his own voice from years long gone when he taught Dahlia how to chop firewood.

“That’s really useful. Thank you! It’s so nice of you to help me out,” Kathelynn studied the axe carefully, processing Dodger’s advice.

Dodger stepped back into his truck, trying to not think about the nice things Slim had said about him behind his back. Slim stumbled back into the truck, still waving at Kathelynn.

Sometime during the drive, Slim asked if he could eat the moon pie that had been sat on and flattened the day before. As Slim shoveled the pie shrapnel down his piehole, he asked something that stopped Dodger in his tracks.

“Hey, three weeks ago at like two in the morning I saw you drive up your driveway. Who was that in the back of your truck?” Slim crumpled up the empty wrapper and threw it on the ground with total disregard.

“Wha... what? What do you mean?” Dodger stuttered.

“Yeah, I locked myself out of the house so I walked down the street to see if that house that’s for sale had an unlocked window I could climb through so I could have somewhere to sleep. Well, that’s when you drove past me. You had some weird, skinny bald guy in the back of your truck. Looked real tall too. Never seen him before. Weird lookin’ fella.” Slim swept the crumbs from his shirt. Dodger struggled to clear his throat as his chest tightened up. He felt as if a fire had started deep within his stomach. What the hell was Slim talking about? Dodger didn’t remember that at all.

“Tall... skinny guy... in the back of my truck? You saw him? Are you sure?” Dodger croaked, his voice barely able to break through the radio static becoming increasingly hotter and louder.

“Yeah. I waved but you didn’t notice me and that skinny fella just ignored me too. He was wearing... welding goggles or something, maybe. I dunno. What a toothpick though. I never seen anyone that skinny,” Slim’s words hit Dodger like needles.

“That was...” Dodger’s muscles locked up as he recalled the image of the creature he saw on Fort’s camera. Did Slim see the creature in person? What was it doing in the back of the truck? “That was... my cousin.”

“Oh. Huh. Well, get that guy a steak or something,” Slim spouted as he fiddled with the seat handle, trying to recline it back but failing clumsily. The grinding of the metal and plastic echoed in Dodger’s ears with a sharp pain.

Before Dodger knew it, his truck pulled into the parking lot of a square, stout, building surrounded by hills and the shadows of towering trees. Atop the building sat a sign that read “Valiant Guns & Ammo” in bold red and blue lettering. American flags hung proudly from the awnings of the building, along with wind chimes made from large gauge shell casings. A number of other vehicles were already parked in the lot, along with one of the delivery cars from the Chunky Chicken restaurant. Dodger flinched when he looked at the windows to see them covered in dust. Shellaby always took pride in keeping the windows and building as clean as possible. He opened the front door and felt some comfort in hearing a familiar bell gently chime overhead.

Slim followed close behind as Dodger glanced around the room to check that everything he was familiar with was still there. To the right of the entrance seasonal clothing hung on the racks. Next to that stood an aisle for cases and carrying equipment. Next to that were cleaning tools and gun holster accessories. Up against the wall was an impressive collection of targets made of paper, clay, and metal. On the other side of the building sat an aisle for traditional archery gear; gloves, arm guards, synthetic and natural fur rests, strings, and more. The aisle next to that held gear for compound bows, and next to that, equipment for crossbows. Against the wall were shelves of all kinds of tracking gear such as trail cameras, night vision optics, and binoculars. In the way that a theme park filled the air with a swirling fragrance of cotton candy and chili

cheese fries, the gun shop seemed to circulate the aroma of gun cleaning oil and hardwood varnish.

Dodger moseyed on up to the counter at the back of the store to see a red-eyed, exhausted man in his 60s, with drooping shoulders and irritated, twitching hands struggling to grasp a paper cup of coffee. Next to him stood a solid-shouldered young man with short black hair and a calm look on his face that seemed to be barely able to hold back an open-toothed smile of excitement. On the young man's head sat a Chunky Chicken baseball cap with shiny yellow brim and googly eyes. The logo of the Chunky Chicken restaurant proudly emblazoned the back of his polo shirt. The young man's even-tempered eyes focused sharply on paperwork that was being shuffled just on the other side of the counter.

Shuffling the papers was a gentle-eyed middle aged woman with curled blonde hair fighting back the graying of many long, exhausting years. Shellaby Winterrose separated some papers from the seemingly endless stack of applications and approval notices before looking up and giving Dodger a wink and a wave. The old man turned around to sluggishly sling his bloodshot eyes toward Dodger.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Million Dollarbuck croaked out, his voice cracking with weary weight. As he turned to face Dodger, his hand holding his coffee leaned at a dangerous angle. Just before his coffee could spill all over the floor, the young man next to him reached out, his arm swooping down effortlessly like an eagle in flight, catching Million's hand and holding it in place. Calmly, quietly, the young man gently titled Million's hand back to level out the coffee cup and stop it from spilling. Dodger took a small step

back and flinched, knowing Million was about to blow his top. Through all the years Dodger had lived, he had met only few men with a temper as explosive and hair-triggered as Million; a man who didn't even like people and certainly didn't take kindly to being touched by people.

This was it. Million was about to lose his shit.

Million looked up toward the young man and gave him a nod before raising his unsteady hand to his face and taking a sip of his coffee. The young man shrugged before looking toward Dodger with a smile.

"Hi! Good morning, Mr. Rodgers," Rominic Rodriguez stepped forward and extended his hand, greeting Dodger with a confident handshake.

"Good morning, kid. What brings you around these parts?" Dodger asked, keeping his eyes locked on Million, trying to understand why the old man hadn't just lost his temper.

"My boss is getting me a gun. Isn't that awesome?" Rominic let slip his boyish excitement as he openly grinned.

"That's very... generous of Million," Dodger replied, trying to not look surprised.

"A man's gotta be able to protect himself. The woods around here can be dangerous," Million locked eyes with Dodger, staring him down, communicating something he didn't want to say with words. For a moment, the two men remain locked in their stony gaze. Maybe it was just Dodger's imagination but he thought he saw Million's eyes glance down at Dodger's bandaged hand for a split second.

“Aaaand... here we go. A Chekhov K7 semi-automatic pistol. Please make sure this is what you ordered,” Shellaby set a felt cloth down on the glass counter before setting the shiny, brand new gun atop the cloth.

“Holy shit that’s-,” Dodger gasped, stopping himself just before commenting on the price.

“Expensive as fuck!” with wide eyes, Slim completed Dodger’s sentence. Rominic turned around and blushed, feeling embarrassed at the comments.

“I don’t know Boss. I’m happy with a cheaper one. I don’t want such expensive stuff,” Rominic whispered to Million.

“Don’t listen to those assholes. Money won’t save your life when there’s nothing between the jaws of an animal and your throat,” Million spoke firmly. He glanced back at Dodger from the corner of his eye before he turned his back and whispered something to Rominic. Million nudged Rominic with his shoulder, and for the briefest moments, Dodger caught the fleeting glimpse of a memory from long, long ago; seeing a much younger Million encourage his little brother who was buying his first car. It was a different time and Million was a very different man.

“I’m not trying to upsell you, but Million knows his stuff. A Chekhov gun always fire right when you need it to. You can always count on it. I carry one myself when I go up on the mountain to do photography,” Shellaby reassured Rominic with a motherly voice and a smile. Rominic’s excitement eventually got the better of him as his nudged Million’s shoulder back.

“Okay, you’re right. I’ll take this one,” Rominic grinned, just about ready to jump into the air. Quietly, secretly, Million smiled with a sense of accomplishment to himself.

“Alright, Dodger, what can I do for ya, hon?” Shellaby asked, clearing the top of the counter of the papers and assorted items.

“I need a handful of those little plastic cards you stick in the camera,” Dodger answered.

“Little plastic cards? You mean memory cards?” Shellaby cocked her head to the side.

“Yeah, I guess that’s what I need,” Dodger shrugged, showing Shellaby his melted memory card.

“What in blue blazes did you do to this thing!?” Shellaby’s jaw dropped. “I hope you didn’t lose anything important.”

“No... It wasn’t anything important,” Dodger hesitated for a moment.

“And what do you mean by a handful? These aren’t peanuts, you know,” Shellaby stifled some laughter.

“Well, I don’t know. Just a bunch of ‘em,” Dodger tried to sound confident, estimating how many Fort might need. From the corner of his eye, he watched Million pat Rominic on the back, both men excited to take the gun out to the range to give it a try. The first smile Dodger had ever seen on Million Dollarbuck’s face washed away any idea of materialism and the fleeting, intangible value of money. Why was Million spending money like that? Why was he buying one of his

employees a gun? In that moment, as both Rominic and Million shared the indescribable, universal joy of picking up a cool new toy, Dodger wished that he could have had own son when he still had the chance. He shook his head clear of drifting thoughts. "And pick the good quality memory cards. Not the cheap ones."

"So a handful of high quality little plastic cards that you stick in the camera," Shellaby lowered her glasses to the very end of her nose and peered at Dodger with lowered eyelids, teasing him with another stifled laugh.

"Okay, haw-haw, I'm old. I get it," Dodger laughed.

"And Slim, did you lock yourself out of your house again?" Shellaby asked.

"Yes ma'am," Slim sheepishly answered, looking away to hide his embarrassment.

"Alright, be right back," Shellaby said as she walked away and entered a door leading to some back room.

"Oh, hey, Dodger, are you done with my angle grinder? It's been three weeks. Am I ever gonna get that back?" Million asked, pouring the last of his coffee down his mouth.

"Three weeks ago... angle grinder?" Dodger felt his hands go ice cold as a distant memory crawled back to him from out of the darkness.

"Yeah, you said something about a bear trap. You didn't lose my angle grinder, did you? I don't carry cheap shit like Falcon. I only have the best hardware," Million said, scratching his five o' clock shadow.

“No, I’ve got it. It’s just in... my basement,” Dodger mumbled, the words escaping him without his control.

“Good. Clementine says they’re doing a bonfire tonight. I’ll be there for a drink so meet me there. I need my angle grinder for a job tomorrow,” Million said with an unusual amount of patience.

“Yeah, of course. Tonight. Bring the angle grinder. I just... gotta get it from my basement.”