

ALIEN ATTITUDES:

Alura Allen, Alien at Large

by Terence A. (Tiger) Russell

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Dedication

For: my dear departed mother, from whom I inherited a love of reading and whose ever-growing library supplied most of the written material my young, eager, fertile mind required; my dear departed father, from whom I inherited an innate quirkiness and unique level of ingenuity and whose dreams of authorship and publication inspired me; and, finally, my dear departed spouse, Betsy, whose untimely death left a hole in my life so large that only a universe of imagination could fill it.

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Upon initial view, many would view this as a valueless seed. If we judge its value, however, prior to its maturity, do we rob it of its opportunity to blossom into a flower of priceless beauty? - Kackinton Morz - Marconian Philosopher, Third Dynasty of Emperor Ming.

PROLOGUE - *17 years ago*

The scene was hectic. Emergency vehicles of every sort were scattered across the landscape like children's toys after a hard day at play. Blaring tones from the variety of sirens joined together to create an deafening cacophony.

Sergeant Johnson, LAPD, was the first officer on the scene. Despite the sirens and the din of voices from the emergency crew, there was a distinguishable sound assailing his ears. Sergeant Johnson heard the cries of a wailing baby. That sound, however, seemed to be coming from the bottom of the canyon.

"What happened?" Sergeant Johnson asked an ambulance driver as he eyed the fresh black stipes of rubber on the road's surface.

"Guy over there called it in," the driver answered. With his hand, he pointed toward a young boy on the other side of the road. The boy was sitting on a rock, his head resting in his hands. "Lives nearby. Said he was walking and saw the car at the bottom of the canyon. Ran home to call for assistance."

"Can I get down there?" Sergeant Johnson inquired, indicating the canyon.

"They're rigging up rappelling gear, right now." The ambulance driver pointed toward where a group of firemen were stepping into their harnesses. Sergeant Johnson turned to look back over his shoulder at the firemen as the ambulance driver continued, "Looks like someone is going down, now, to check on the vehicle's passengers."

Another police squad car arrived. Sergeant Johnson approached just as that officer stepped from his vehicle. "Talk to that young man over there," Sergeant Johnson directed, pointing to the young witness, still sitting on the rock. "I am gonna go try to climb to the bottom of the canyon with the firemen. Anyone else arrives, tell them to secure the area and to canvass for additional witnesses."

Sergeant Johnson approached the Fire Captain. "How's it going at the bottom of that canyon? There's a baby crying down there, so we have at least one survivor."

"Yes, Sergeant, I agree. I'm just now heading down myself. I'll let you know what we find via radio."

"Any chance I might tag along?"

"Can you rappel?"

"It's been awhile, but I did when I was in the Army."

"Then get hooked up and come on down. I've already got men on the canyon floor and need to go now. I can't wait for you." The Captain turned to another fireman and stated, "Get the Sergeant in a harness," before he hooked a D-ring onto one of several ropes that had been secured to hooks on the front bumper of the big red fire engine, backed over the edge of the canyon lip and jumped.

Sergeant Johnson briefly observed the Captain's progress as he quickly fell from sight and waited while a young fireman retrieved a seat harness from a compartment in the rescue vehicle. The fireman handed him the nylon mesh contraption and Sergeant Johnson stepped into it, cinching it tightly around his waist. After tugging on one of the ropes to ensure it was free, he clipped on, backed over the lip, and pushed off. The 30-foot descent to the bottom of the canyon was one long, smooth glide and he landed securely on the craggy surface at the canyon bottom.

The car, a late model, metallic blue, four-door Chevrolet was resting on its crushed roof. The roof was completely compacted and flattened against the body cavity. The wailing of the unseen infant was coming from within the car's interior. In the close space between the canyon walls, the ear-splitting, high toned cry was drowning out every other sound.

Sergeant Johnson approached the vehicle around which the rescue crew had gathered. The Captain was on the radio. Sergeant Johnson eavesdropped as he barked his orders to the men above: "Bring the

emergency truck to the edge and hook up the winch. Lower a body platform with bars. String 50 feet of pneumatic hose and lower the hammer and saw. We are going to have to cut our way inside."

After relaying his orders, the Captain turned to Sergeant Johnson. "Any other signs of life inside?" Sergeant Johnson asked.

"Other than the baby?"

"Yeah, any other sounds of life coming from inside the vehicle?"

"Not yet, but the other occupants could be unconscious. We'll need to get a good look inside to assess whatever injuries they might have sustained as quickly as possible. Landing on the roof like that means possible neck injuries."

"Yeah, that seems like a sure bet. How long before we get that look inside?"

"Ten minutes or so ... once we get the equipment down here. Gonna have to cut partially through one of the doors and pry back the metal manually. Without knowing how the people are situated on the inside, we can't chance cutting all the way through. Might cause further injury."

"Do what you gotta do, Captain. I will be here with my fingers crossed that everyone survived."

“From the look of this car, Sergeant, I think prayers might be in order.”

During their conversation, the equipment had been lowered. The other firemen had already begun to execute their duties. Over the next few minutes, they cut, pried, cut some more, and then pried again. Finally, the rear passenger’s side door was partially opened.

One of the young firemen quickly dropped to his knees to look inside. The wailing baby was easily located just on the other side of the opening, hanging upside down in a space between two cold, lifeless legs.

The fireman bent down, felt around the infant for signs of major injury, and, finding none, gently coaxed it from its nest amid the carnage. Once freed from the confines of the wrecked car, the fireman cradled the child and stood, carefully supporting the infant’s neck in his huge gloved hand. He turned and searched for another fireman upon whom to bestow his precious parcel.

The Captain, seeing the young fireman’s indecision, barked, “Get that baby up to the ambulance, now.”

The young fireman clutching the baby found his way over to the body board and lay upon it, clutching the still crying baby to his chest. Two other firemen quickly strapped him in and then tugged twice on the cable. The body board began to be slowly winched up

the canyon wall.

As soon as that young firemen had moved from the vehicle, another fireman had taken his place at the opening and had partially crawled into the interior of the wreck to check the condition of the remaining passengers. He emerged quickly, peered toward the Fire Captain and shook his head. "Three dead," he said, "Young adult male in the front passenger seat, young adult female, likely the mother of the child, just inside the opening, and middle-aged adult female behind the wheel."

"OK," said the Captain to the rescue group, "Nothing more we can do. Smitty," he said to the fireman who had just inspected the interior of the vehicle and still stood near it. "You stay down and hook up the cable for the wrecker company. The rest of us are gonna climb out." The Fire Captain had not yet finished speaking when some of the firemen, utilizing the ropes, began to ascend the canyon wall.

Sergeant Johnson took a pen and pad from his breast pocket and jotted down the make, model, and license number of the vehicle before he too approached the ropes and began his ascent. The climb back up the canyon wall, however, proved to be a bit more strenuous than he had recalled. He struggled and cursed his middle-aged midriff paunch.

Following several minutes of arduous physical effort, Sergeant Johnson finally reached the lip of the canyon. The Fire Captain reached out, grasped his

hand, and yanked him up over the edge. "The baby checks out, completely unharmed," the Captain said, as Sergeant Johnson regained his feet.

"That's something, at least," Sergeant Johnson said, motioning for one of the several police officers now at the scene to approach.

When the young officer stood before him, Sergeant Johnson tore a page from his pad and handed it to the officer. "Run this plate through DMV and see if we can locate a next of kin for that baby that survived." The Sergeant then walked off toward the ambulance.

"I was told that the baby suffered no injury," he stated, flatly, to the ambulance driver.

"None that I was able to detect with the equipment I have here. The doctors at Mercy Memorial want to do some tests," the driver said, and, seeing the question on Sergeant Johnson's face, continued, "to check for signs of internal injuries. I was just now advised to 'transport with due haste.'"

"Go!" Sergeant Johnson immediately replied, "I'll be right behind you." As he walked over to his unmarked car, the ambulance engaged its lights and siren, then sped off in the direction of the hospital. Sergeant Johnson yelled to another of the officers, "If anything comes back on that plate, I'll be with the baby at Mercy." The officer nodded his acknowledgment. Sergeant Johnson then climbed into his nondescript Ford and sped off after the ambulance.

Mercy Memorial Hospital was a short drive from the accident scene and the ambulance had already delivered its precious cargo to the emergency room by the time Sergeant Johnson arrived. He had just pulled his car into a parking space when his radio crackled, "Unit 14, this is Base."

"Base, this is Unit 14."

"You wanted the DMV info on a plate?"

"Right."

"Car shows to be registered to Colonel Paul Acosta, El Toro."

"Thanks Base. Have someone contact El Toro and locate this Colonel Acosta or his next of kin. No ID yet for the other passengers of the vehicle, but we have a young motherless, and possibly fatherless, infant who was the sole survivor of a deadly accident up on Mulholland Drive. The baby is at Mercy and I am currently at that location."

"Will do."

"Also, have someone at the scene report to me with the collected data from the accident investigation. I am going in to check on the baby's condition. Unit 14 out."

Sergeant Johnson entered the emergency room. He could hear the child still wailing loudly. Out of

professional courtesy, he approached the intake desk. "A baby was just brought in from an MVA. I'm the investigating officer."

"Treatment Room 6," said the nurse, pointing to her left without even looking up.

"Thanks," Johnson muttered as he moved off down the long tiled hall to his right. Intimately familiar with Mercy's ER, he easily located Treatment Room 6. Silently peering in, he watched as an ER doctor, listening intently, moved a stethoscope over the baby's torso. Upon completion of his examination, the doctor turned and dictated his findings to the nurse: "No injuries detected. Infant, few days old. Crying, but most likely due to hunger. Keep her in Maternity Ward until she can be released to some relative or a social worker."

The nurse busily jotted down what she was told on the baby's chart. Upon completion of the notes, she placed the chart back in its proper place at the foot of the bed. She then gently lifted the child from the examination table, clutching it to her breast, and the infant's seemingly tireless wailing ceased. The nurse looked into the small face and smiled. She turned and walked past Sergeant Johnson. He peered at the baby who nestled securely in her arms, observing a small cherub face with a tuft of blonde hair. Two vivid blue eyes sparkled briefly before closing, as the child drifted off into peaceful slumber.

"Nurse," he said, after she had passed, but before

she had walked very far. She stopped and turned. He continued, "Did I hear right? The child is a girl? I will need that for my report."

"It's a girl."

"Thanks." The nurse nodded, smiled, and proceeded toward the elevator.

"Sergeant Johnson," said a police officer, walking quickly in his direction.

"Yes?"

"We were able to reach Colonel Acosta's commander and he reported that Colonel Acosta is currently out to sea. Officer Levi explained the situation to the Admiral and was assured by the Admiral that the Corps would chopper the Colonel back to base ASAP. ETA is two, maybe three hours."

"Good. Pass the word along to all the personnel involved that the baby is unharmed and is in the care of Maternity. Pass that information along to Colonel Acosta, as well. I am guessing that everyone is aware already that all of the other people in the vehicle had perished?"

"Yes, that news was given to the Admiral, as well, and according to the Admiral, it's likely that the other passengers were the Colonel's wife, daughter, and son-in-law."

"What about the cause of the accident? Were you able to get anything on that?"

"No one saw anything. My best guess is that the driver swerved to miss an animal or something."

"Is the kid still at the scene?"

"The one that called the accident in? Yes."

"Make sure we know how to find him for follow-up questions, if need be, and cut him loose."

"You want me to hang around and wait for the Colonel? You look tired."

Before Sergeant Johnson could answer, the nurse tapped his shoulder, "Sorry to interrupt, Officer, but I got some additional information that I thought you would like to have for your report."

"Sure, what do you have for me?"

"Well, it seems that Maternity recognized the child. She was born here three days ago and she and her mother were released earlier today. Maternity says the child's name is Alura Allen. Her mother was Susan Allen and her father's name is Stuart Allen."

"Thanks for that information," he replied. The nurse nodded and went off to seek her next duty.

"Sarge, you didn't answer. Don't you want to get

some rest? I can sit here and await next of kin.”

“No, I’m the investigating officer. It’d be better if I stayed to await the Colonel’s arrival.”

The officer, assenting to his decision, turned and left. After he had gone, Sergeant Johnson went to the cafeteria for a cup of coffee and a couple of donuts. He checked the time. It was just after 4:00 p.m. *It’ll be a long two hours*, he thought.

In his earlier haste, he had parked near the ambulance bay, so returned to his car. He needed to free up the essential parking space. As it was still likely an hour or more before the Colonel would arrive, the Sergeant climbed into his vehicle and circled the outlying areas of several visitor parking lots. He passed up several vacant spaces seeking a shady spot near the helipad, a perfect place to await the arrival of Colonel Acosta.

Once such a space was vacated, he parked and sat in the vehicle, scribbling the necessary notes about the accident he would use later to complete his official report into his notebook:

MVA, Mulholland @ Canyon Drive, 7/26/86 appx. 2:30 p.m. No collision. All indications are that vehicle swerved to miss animal and drove over edge into canyon, accident due to faulty evasive action. Car flipped came to rest at bottom of canyon appx. 30 feet down on roof. Roof caved. Rescue used pneumatics to cut into vehicle. Three dead, one survivor, small infant girl. Survivor

identified as Alura Allen by Mercy Hospital personnel, victims are believed to be child's mother, Susan Allen, child's father, Stuart Allen, and maternal grandmother, only known information is Mrs. Colonel Paul Acosta, USMC.

He hastily doodled a diagram of the accident scene beneath the notes.

He again checked the time. With his notes completed, there was now nothing more for Sergeant Johnson to do but await the arrival of Colonel Acosta. He leaned back in his seat, closed his eyes, and listened to the traffic on the police radio. His thoughts became occupied in an effort to compose the words that would most accurately explain the incident.

As this was not the first time the duty had fallen on him to pass along such news, he could imagine how devastated the Colonel would be to receive his report. Sergeant Johnson wondered how he would react to news of the deaths of his wife, daughter and son-in-law.

The sun was low on the western horizon. The summer evening was as hot and sticky as were most July evenings in LA. Still laying back with his eyes closed, Sergeant Johnson continued to mentally compose the report that he was duty-bound to provide to the Colonel. The delivery of bad news to tragic victims' loved ones was the part of his job that he liked least.

The distinct whop-whop sound of a helicopter's

whirling blades could be heard. Sergeant Johnson opened his eyes at the sound and watched out the car window as the landing aircraft fluttered in for a landing. The Navy insignia on the chopper's side was plain to see and Sergeant Johnson assumed that it must be Colonel Acosta's transport. He exited his vehicle and slowly began his walk toward the helipad, some forty feet away. As he neared the helipad, a tall man jumped from the door of the aircraft.

The figure, clad in military fatigues, hunkered as he walked beneath the still rotating blades. He had taken only a few steps from the door when the chopper again rose into the darkening azure blue sky overhead.

"Colonel Acosta?" Sergeant Johnson called over the roar of the rising copter's engines.

"Yes, I am Colonel Acosta."

"I am Sergeant Johnson, LAPD. I investigated the accident that took place earlier today."

"Yes, thank you. I understand that my wife, daughter and son-in-law perished, but my granddaughter escaped unharmed?"

"That is correct, sir."

"What happened?"

"According to my best belief, the driver of the vehicle

swerved to avoid something in the road and plummeted into the canyon bottom.”

The Colonel’s black eyes just stared blankly back in response. “Say again.”

“Someone took faulty evasive action to miss a dog or something and swerved into the canyon.”

“I thought that is what you said.”

“I’m sorry to have had to be the one to provide the sad details of this tragedy, though ... somehow ... this matter has proven to be much easier than I would have ever imagined.”

“Sergeant Johnson, I’ve been in the Navy for almost 30 years and am currently in command of a SEAL unit. As such, I’ve seen my share of tragedy and death.

“I lost both my parents when I was 14. My dad died in Korea during the last days of that war and my mother was killed less than a month afterward by a drunk driver. My son-in-law’s father was my best friend in Viet Nam. He died in my arms as a result of friendly fire. And only last month, following her own battle with lung cancer, I attended his widow’s funeral.

“Now, it seems, I am now the only living relative of my baby granddaughter.”

"Well, she is one beautiful child and is waiting for you right inside, sir."

"Thanks," Colonel Acosta said as he started toward the hospital.

"Colonel Acosta, if I may ask, what are you going to do now?"

"Currently, I'm on emergency leave. It'll take me a day or so to make all the necessary arrangements, but I'll take that little girl back to my old home place in New Mexico and do my best to raise her."

"The very best of luck to you, Colonel Acosta. The best of luck to both you and little Alura."

"Alura? I wasn't sure what they had finally decided to name that child. Thanks, Sergeant. Thanks for being here and thanks for your most thorough briefing on the event."

CHAPTER ONE - *Present Day*

Alura was sitting quietly at the kitchen table. Bright sunshine streamed through the windows, brilliantly illuminating the interior of the cabin. In her hands, she held an open book. The book was entitled merely Love Story and was the first of several she had borrowed from Mrs. Munoz, the kind lady that ran the local store.

Alura was thoroughly engrossed in the story when a strange noise drew her attention. Paps was atop the cabin, patching holes in its roof. She listened intently for signs he was still busily doing so. All, however, was quiet. Suddenly, she heard the clatter of the pitch bucket as it rolled off the roof. "Paps!" Alura cried as she ran from the cabin onto the broad porch that fronted the rustic home.

As she'd yelled, something else had tumbled from the roof. Frantically, she jumped from the porch, circled the cabin's corner to discover her grandfather lying motionless on the ground.

Hoping she was not already too late to assist, Alura

sprinted those last few steps. She thought of Pap's words as he was instructing her in all manner of first aid procedures: "We have to take care of each other. It's just you and me here, so if one of us can't help the other, no one else can do it."

Alura had excelled in those lessons and knew what to do. She instantly fell to her knees and began to compress his chest and to blow her breath into Pap's mouth. She continued these efforts for several minutes, however Paps was unresponsive. Finally giving up, Alura sat hard upon a nearby stump. She wanted to cry but could not and would not do so. Paps would not have wanted her to cry.

Her mind began to race, full of thoughts as to what she should do. Paps had given her few instructions concerning what she should do in the event of his sudden, untimely, death.

After considerable contemplation, she concluded that the logical first step would be to contact Sheriff Martinez. That, itself, would take some effort, though, as there was no phone at the cabin. Due to the remote location of the cabin, even in this modern day, it was difficult to obtain phone or electrical service. *In actuality*, thought Alura, *Paps had taken such great pride in being able to survive off of the power grid, that he'd eschewed any efforts to obtain either service*. Having grown accustomed to not having either, Alura had never felt deprived at the lack of such amenities.

The closest phone, however, was a 30 minute drive down from the top of their mountain to the village in the valley. The Sheriff's Office was there as well. Alura had never made the drive into the valley alone. Previously, there had never been a need for her to do so. The turns were sharp and the old truck was very hard to handle. Paps had always felt it was his place to handle that rigorous task. However, Paps was not here to handle it now.

She and Paps had regularly gone to the village. Several times a month, the two of them made trips to the local store for supplies and to check the mail. Mrs. Munoz, the store owner, kept a paperback library in the back of the store and Alura often borrowed books, several at a time. Only two days ago, they had made a special trip to buy the pitch and supplies to patch the roof.

Other than the store, however, they had rarely had any dealings with any of the valley residents. Paps had no real love for the company of other people and particularly disliked dealing with the locals. He had once told her that they were all "idiots." She sensed he had some residual memories from that period of time he spent in the area following his mother's death. He had once disclosed how their cruelty had caused him to run away to join the Navy when he was barely 17.

Alura was also aware that he had only returned to the area because it was a very secure environment in which to raise a little girl. He had said as much, on

more than one occasion.

The previous year, Alura had gotten an opportunity to meet Sheriff Martinez. He had visited their home with questions for her and Paps regarding knowledge they might have about an escapee from the state penitentiary that had been seen in the local area. From her memories of their conversations, Alura recalled that the Sheriff's Office was only a mile or so past the village store. She felt sure that Sheriff Martinez would know what to do about Paps and was thoroughly convinced that he would be the proper person to contact.

Confident of her decision, Alura considered what to do with the body. She had never previously been in such a position, but felt something needed to be done. She could capably move the body into the house, she knew. However, it was late and she did need to notify the Sheriff. She would just have to leave the body where it lay.

She crossed the small meadow that fronted the cabin to reach a shed on the other side. Selecting a small tarp from of a stack in the back of the shed, she dragged it back across the meadow to where Paps lay and pulled it over Pap's dead body. The tarp would likely be insufficient protection from prowling coyotes and wolves, but Alura believed the vultures were a more immediate problem. Alura hoped the tarp would conceal the dead body from view and keep the vultures away until she could return with Sheriff Martinez.

It was still early afternoon, and, if she could get started soon, she was hopeful she would be able to return before nightfall. Alura was nervous enough about driving that road, as it was, and had no desire to attempt the perilous route in the dark of night. Paps himself had expressed his own fear in doing so and had always timed their trips so that they always arrived home well before the sun dipped below the mountains to the west.

Alura entered the cabin and took the truck keys from the hook behind the cabin door. Her eyes darted around the cabin's interior to insure that there were no unsafe conditions she needed to address before departing for a few hours. Upon finding no evident dangers, she closed the door behind her and again crossed the meadow, this time, to a larger shed next to the drive. An old 68 GMC pickup was parked inside.

She climbed into the truck and cranked its engine. As the pickup had been recently driven, the battery was fully charged and it turned easily. She engaged the clutch and shifted the transmission into granny gear, a really low gear designed to maximize power on steep climbs, or so Paps had told her. With a 6% grade all the way to the bottom of the mountain on the rutted and boulder-strewn road, Paps had said granny gear was "the only gear that was really needed, going up or down." Alura released the clutch and the truck moved slowly out of the shed and onto the drive.

At the very bottom of the drive, Alura strained to pull the wheel hard to the right. She knew, from having observed Paps, that such maneuver was necessary in order to dodge a very large boulder that blocked all forward progress.

In her effort to safely navigate past the boulder, Alura accidentally allowed the front tires to fall into deep ruts cut from previous travels. Paps had always tried to avoid riding in the ruts. He said, "The road is much smoother when you are able to avoid some of the worst potholes."

"The ruts pull you right through the very worst parts," he had explained. However, Alura also knew that because the ruts were so deep, she would now experience a rough ride all the way to Jackrabbit Draw where the road was too rocky for ruts.

It did prove to be an extremely bumpy ride as the truck bounced easily along, its tires riding in the deep grooves. However, Alura had hardly needed to steer the vehicle as those same ruts served to guide it along the proper path. She mused silently to herself about whether the accompanying jostling of riding the ruts was worth not having to continually wrestle with the truck's difficult steering system.

The truck had once had power steering. Over the years, however, Paps had found the parts difficult to procure. Eventually, he found himself totally unable to make any further repairs to the steering system. As such, it now required extreme physical exertion to

steer the truck either left or right. Paps, never believing the steering chore to be unmanageable, had stated, "It is not yet time to buy a new truck."

Alura had never been given much opportunity to practice driving. Her whole experience had been limited to making the short trips to the water hole and back. Paps had not, to that point, ever discussed allowing her to make the drive down into the village. Thus far, however, the drive, although quite difficult, had not proven to be beyond her capabilities.

Eventually, Alura arrived at Jackrabbit Draw, a low place between two ridges that funneled water during the wet seasons. It was dry at this late date in the year. As it rolled onto the rocky, eroded earth surrounding the draw, the truck climbed out of the ruts. The rock was waterworn and the ride was smooth. It was an easy drive, as well, because the road went straight across the rock bottomed draw.

Beyond Jackrabbit Draw was a short climb to the top of Eagle's Eye where the steep descent into the canyon floor on what Paps had always termed "a goat track" would begin. The narrow road hugged the edge of Black Dog Canyon for several miles.

As she inched closer and closer toward that plunge to the canyon's bottom, Alura's confidence waned. She began to fight a growing sense of fear and apprehension about her own ability to safely negotiate the most difficult stretch of this journey and her mind labored in its efforts to ease such

qualms.

Alura did, however, possess an abundance of survival skills. Paps had imparted to her a good portion of his SEAL training. That training, itself, had become a major part of their day-to-day lifestyle. Paps found great enjoyment in his abilities to live directly off of the land itself, needing just a few meager supplies from the outside world. It was unlikely that many in 21st Century America shared his passion.

Alura had spent her early childhood playing, chasing, learning, falling, laughing, and working in her natural surroundings. Most of her life had been restricted to their home high atop this mesa in the mountains of northern New Mexico, an environment which she intimately understood. She felt quite secure amid its wildness.

Over the last few years, Alura's skill level had progressed to a point where she had begun to feel increasingly confident in her abilities. Lately, she found that she could defeat Paps in any competition, including martial arts.

"You can shoot straight and gut and clean with the best of men," Paps had once said. "From this point forward, you should fear nothing, my girl. You have proven your capability to care for yourself." Alura had been 12 when he had made that affirmation. Yet, she had only grown stronger and more proficient in the almost five years since.

As the beginning of the steep downward path neared, Alura continually reminded herself that she had surely been taught everything that she needed to know to conquer any obstacle that life could possibly place before her. Over these past few years, on several occasions, Paps had said as much. *I can do this!* she thought to herself as her confidence returned. If ever she was going to be ready for Rattlesnake Way, it was this day.

Ahead lay its beginning-- a gateway cut through a large rock formation. The roadway sloped slightly upward and cut sharply to the left through the crevice. With all the force she could muster, Alura jerked the wheel left, aptly coaxing the truck through Eagle's Eye. She gunned the engine, which assisted movement forward and eased the turning of the wheel. Seeing daylight ahead, Alura was assured that she had successfully executed the troublesome turn.

The road ahead was exceedingly narrow and nuzzled against the side of the canyon wall. It now dropped sharply off toward the canyon bottom and appeared scarcely wide enough for passage. Her previous experience had taught that it was possible. However, from her vantage point, appearances were deceiving.

Alura guided the truck close to the side of the rock face. As the road began to decline steeply, the granny gear struggled against the Earth's strong gravitational pull. In assistance to its efforts, Alura continually exerted pressure upon the brake pedal.

Because Paps had welded a big I-beam to the front of the truck, scraping the cliff wall could do little harm, she knew. That knowledge allowed Alura to easily maintain her composure as she now heard, and felt, scraping against the canyon wall. She did not panic and merely continued her steady pressure on both steering wheel and brake.

Following several minutes of steadily downward travel, the road leveled off slightly. Alura gradually eased the pressure upon the brake and quickly changed her position on the truck seat. She knew the repositioning was necessary to successfully negotiate the next obstacle-- a sharp hairpin right turn. Afterward, the grade would again decline sharply.

In negotiating the turn, Alura used both hands when pulling the wheel to the right. The front of the truck slid just off the wall as it navigated through the hairpin turn without incident. As the grade again dropped off, Alura slid back into her previous position and renewed her hard pressure upon the brake pedal. Again, she pulled the wheel back over to the left, keeping the truck as close to the canyon wall as possible.

Dead Man's Jog had easily earned its name over the time since Paps' people had first settled upon this barren land and thereafter established it as their ancestral home. Failure to negotiate the hairpin turn successfully meant that you either crashed into the canyon wall or ended up on the canyon bottom. Either scenario had resulted in death.

Alura was quite pleased with herself for having completed the difficult maneuver without mishap. Even Paps had scraped the I-beam bumper on the wall, on occasion, when wrestling the truck around that bend. She, herself, had been anticipating a similar result, but had done it without incident *on the very first try!* Alura's elation in her success additionally assisted in quelling her feelings of trepidation with the remainder of the journey ahead. She knew the other two turns on this downward slope were not nearly as arduous as Dead Man's Jog.

Alura still would not avert her eyes to look into the canyon. Instead, her concentration was affixed upon the road's winding track along the canyon wall. She visualized the forward route in her mind and mentally prepared to meet the road ahead.

A bit left here, a bit right there, constant pressure on the brake-- Alura continually wrested that truck around bends while fighting the zealous tug of gravity which eagerly sought to pull the truck, and herself, down to destruction upon the canyon floor. She allowed herself to become integrated with the truck's movement along the road and, soon, piloting the truck began to feel easy and natural. Although the effort was sometimes arduous, she ably maintained proper course and speed.

The minutes ticked by as the truck moved continually forward and downward and the road soon leveled off into a green meadow full of wild flowers. Alura smiled as she knew that she had safely arrived at the

canyon's bottom. Across this small meadow and over the slight rise ahead, she would be able to observe the roof line of the Munoz store.

Unlike every previous trip into this valley, that store was not the final destination. Alura, however, knew of no other way to get to the Sheriff's Office without passing the store. If she recalled correctly the directions that had been given to her over a year ago by Sheriff Martinez, she needed to make a right turn at the store, then cross another ridge and meadow to get there.

As she neared the store, Alura checked for signs that Sheriff Martinez might be there. No vehicles of any kind, however, were parked outside the store. Mr. and Mrs. Munoz kept their own vehicle out of sight, in a shed behind the store.

While making her right turn past the front of the store, Alura watched Mrs. Munoz come running out of the store, waving. *I wonder what she must be thinking*, Alura smugly thought upon realizing that Mrs. Munoz had witnessed the last leg of her very first solo trip down from the top of the mesa. She beamed with pride at her own success.

However, as Alura quickly remembered the reason for this trip, she grimaced and chided herself for her pleasure in this accomplishment. During her arduous journey to the canyon floor, she'd had to concentrate on every step necessary to accomplish that task; however, that very intense level of concentration was

no longer required.

Aloud, Alura said to herself, "I had better start thinking about why I'm here." There would be questions, lots of questions. This she knew. She recalled the endless stream of questions that had accompanied her previous encounter with Sheriff Martinez.

Alura reflected back upon the recent events in her head: she was reading a book; she heard the sound of something as it rolled off the roof; she found Paps dead; she performed CPR unsuccessfully; and she drove down from the mountain to inform the Sheriff.

Gazing out the window, Alura looked upon a cheerful little meadow full of blowing grass and late season wildflowers. It was much like those high mountain meadows where she had played as a child. The scene conjured up pictures in her mind of happier times with Paps. She reflected on those carefree days briefly before fully realizing that, for all purposes, her life had drastically changed. Just three days before her seventeenth birthday and she, suddenly, was alone in the world.

The utter loneliness of her predicament unexpectedly washed over her and caused her mood to sink deeper. She was, just now, caught up in the realization of her new reality and, suddenly, the little meadow didn't seem so cheerful.

As she crossed the slight crest at the far edge of the

meadow, Alura sighted the Sheriff's Office. The office was housed in a small, nondescript, gray cinder block building. The original stucco facade had flaked away over the years and only splotches of it remained to be seen. A black ribbon of two-lane highway ran in front of the building. Along the side of the building, Alura spotted the Sheriff's black and white truck.

As she crossed the highway, Alura looked up and down the black ribbon of road, wondering where it led. She had often heard the loud whines of the trucks' motors echoing as they climbed amid the peaks of the New Mexico mountains, late at night. Paps had often cursed and complained that they drowned out the songs of the crickets but Alura had loved their woeful cries. She had dreamed about those vessels of the dark nights and their distant, exotic destinations.

Alura had, for a long time, longed to see anything other than her little world on top of the mountain. She had often voiced such desires to Paps, but he had always remarked that there would time enough for that in the future.

Alura eased the old GMC into the parking lot and pulled into a space very near to the only visible door into the building. She had not completely rolled to a stop when a uniformed person dashed out the front door. Sheriff Martinez ran up to the side of the GMC. "Ms. Allen? Are you all right?"

"Yes, Sheriff, I'm OK." She inhaled deeply before

continuing, "But Paps is dead."

"Are you sure, sugar? I can get the EMT chopper out if need be."

"I am quite sure, Sheriff. I attempted CPR, but he was unresponsive," Alura said. The Sheriff had bowed his head and now nodded as she spoke. Alura continued, "I covered him up and came right down to tell you about it. I wasn't not sure what else to do."

"Sounds like nothing you could do, sweetie. He went quick, I hope. 'God's Will' as they say. He was getting on up there in years," the Sheriff stated as he looked at his watch. Alura did not need a watch to tell her it would soon be dusk.

"I'll need to go fetch the JP. He's required to declare the time and cause of death, but his Jeep is in the shop." Alura just listened. "Would you like to ride along with me or do you want to wait for me at the store?"

Alura had no time to respond to the Sheriff's question before a large red Ford SUV slid to a stop on the gravel of the parking lot and Mrs. Munoz came charging their way. "What happened? Is everything all right, Alura? Is there something wrong with your granddad?"

Sheriff Martinez put his hand up to quiet her. "Colonel Acosta is dead, Maribelle and I have to go fetch Judge Thomas. I just gave Alura the choice of

riding along with me or waiting at the store with you and Enrico 'til I get back."

"Sheriff ... Mrs. Munoz ... if it is all the same with you two, I'd like to get back up to the cabin before darkness falls. I didn't really want to leave Paps there like that and I'd like to get back up there as soon as I can."

"I hate havin' you try to drive back up that road with that truck, Alura. It'd be safer for you to ride back up with me and the Judge," the Sheriff said. Mrs. Munoz said nothing.

"I am going to do it, Sheriff. I can't just sit here and wait-- not with Paps just lying there. I had to come tell you what happened, but I don't think you can make me stay."

Mrs. Munoz said, "Oh Alura, honey, the Sheriff is right. You don't need to risk driving back up that road alone. Come on back and sit with me at the store. Your granddad is already dead and he don't need a babysitter. That drive is entirely too risky for a wee little child like you."

Alura was quite fond of Mrs. Munoz but that "wee child" reference had fiercely stung. It was only three days until her 17th birthday and she was no longer a child, in any sense. "Thanks, Mrs. Munoz, but I do believe that I am quite capable of driving myself home. I made it down without any problems, and that's the hard part. I'm sure I can get myself back

up to the top of the mesa, just fine," Alura replied with an unintentional derisive inflection.

Sheriff Martinez merely said, "Have it your way, Alura. Without some type of a court order, I am powerless to stop you. So ... I'm off. See ya when I get there." Crossing around the corner of the building, he disappeared from sight. The sound of a vehicle door opening and slamming shut could be heard, followed by the sound of a cranking engine. The engine caught and came to life as Mrs. Munoz reached out, clasped Alura's hand, and began patting it.

"Alura, honey, you are just upset and not thinking straight. Come on back up to the store with me and wait for the Sheriff to return. We can leave that old truck here. No one will bother it, I am sure."

"I've already made my decision, Mrs. Munoz, and I am going back to the cabin. I really don't want to argue about it, not at a time like this."

"That's fine, sweetheart," replied Mrs. Munoz, not recalling sweet little Alura having ever been so impertinent. "You just do as you want." She simply beamed a knowing smile and shuffled off through the gravel. After climbing into the seat of her SUV, she slammed the door and backed out into the road.

Mrs. Munoz paused briefly in her progress to allow Sheriff Martinez' Black Chevy Blazer to pass. It sped off toward the south and Alura's vision of Mrs. Munoz

was blocked for that brief second. After the Sheriff has passed, Alura watched Mrs. Munoz, sitting motionless in the Expedition, rolling down her window. "Alura, if you change your mind, you are always welcome to come back to the store-- no matter the hour. You are welcome to come stay with us, if you want. It'll be lonely all by yourself up there on that mountain, you know."

Alura smiled. Mrs. Munoz had been her only real friend for years and was also the closest thing Alura had ever had to a mother. Her earlier agitation with Mrs. Munoz' innocent remark had subsided and she was able to now calmly reply, "I'll consider it, thanks." She knew, of course, that once she started back to the cabin from the valley floor, there would not be a safe place to turn around until Jackrabbit Draw. Once at that point, Alura was practically home and there would be no turning back. "I'll surely be back to see you soon, Mrs. Munoz. I'm very appreciative of your concern. As always, you are sweet."

Mrs. Munoz waved, rolled up the window, put her vehicle into gear, and turned the corner toward the store. As it crested the ridge, Alura's vision of the red SUV was blocked by a passing big rig. Alura eagerly eyed the truck as it flew past and watched after it as it continued down the road, wondering at its destination. *Does that long trailer contain a large cache of treasure?* she thought, freeing her imagination to momentarily dwell on dreams of a different kind of life.

Once the truck had finally disappeared from sight, Alura again collected her thoughts and returned to her reality. Since she had not moved a foot since her arrival, she turned and climbed back into her seat behind the GMC's wheel, cranked it up, and headed back toward the store. As she passed, Alura waved, but Mrs. Munoz, likely still parking, was unseen.

Alura turned left over the rise toward that point where the narrow track began its climb up the canyon wall. On the upward trail, she knew, there was no need for braking. "Merely steer and let the granny gear do its stuff," was how Paps had described it. Alura, having a few leisurely moments, relaxed and began contemplating her future.

CHAPTER TWO

Alura's return trip was uneventful and she arrived home long before the sun had completely sunk behind the mountains to the west. It had, now, long since grown dark and, under the starry sky, she silently swayed to and fro in the porch swing. From this vantage point, she would be able to see the beams from the headlights of Sheriff Martinez' vehicle when it topped the crest at Eagle's Eye. Although she did not need such, she would have adequate warning of their arrival.

Alura had, however, begun to grow quite weary during the long wait and, once or twice, had seriously contemplated going to bed. Despite her weariness, however, she would not allow herself to abandon some minimal level of vigilance lest it become necessary to chase varmints from Paps' body. At this late hour, both coyotes and the few wolves in the area would soon be prowling for food.

Immediately upon her return, she had checked Paps' remains and found them to have been undisturbed. Thereafter, she had kept watch from her seat on the

porch swing, guarding the body until the Sheriff and the Justice of the Peace arrived.

Alura was now quite eager that whatever was to be done with Pap's body, would be done. Although she was unaware of its cause, she suddenly felt wearier than she had felt in a long time. Her energy and spirits had been severely depleted by the day's events. She currently experienced a degree of exhaustion that exceeded even those days when, physically, she had exerted herself to the point of total fatigue.

Finally, Alura sighted the long-awaited headlights, and, a few short minutes later, the Sheriff's Blazer pulled to a stop just in front of the cabin. The motor was left running and the Blazer's headlights illuminated the blackness. Sheriff Martinez and the Justice of the Peace climbed out. Alura left her seat and strode into the headlights to meet them. The Sheriff spoke. "I am glad you made it home safely, Alura. Where's the body?"

"Around here," Alura said, leading the way around the side of the cabin toward where the body, still covered by the tarp, lay. Sheriff Martinez unhooked a shiny, long, stainless steel flashlight from his belt and flicked the switch. Its bright beam of light cut through the darkness and the Sheriff easily caught up to Alura. The Judge, a stout bald man, jogged, his obese body jiggling in his effort to keep pace.

"Slow down, please. I don't do well with physical

exertion," he huffed, as he tried to catch his breath. "I can't seem to breathe. The air seems so much thinner up here." Alura, having already reached the where Paps lay, halted as he spoke. The Sheriff circled around the tarp covered body, shining his light upon the tarp.

"He's under there," Alura said. The Sheriff jerked the tarp back to reveal the lifeless eyes of Colonel Acosta staring back.

"He's dead, all right," said the JP, breathlessly, as he took the last few steps to arrive just as the tarp was pulled back. "Been dead for awhile, it seems."

"Do you want to examine him?"

"See no sense in it. All indications appear to dictate heart attack. I'll issue a Death Certificate. Cause of death: 'cardiac arrest.' Time of death," he paused, glancing Alura's direction, and asked, "What time would you say it was?"

"It was getting close to lunch time, a bit before."

"Close enough," the Judge said, "Time of death is 11:30 a.m. on July 20, 2003. I see no need for an inquest and my job here is done. May I please get home now?"

"I can take the body back with me, if you'd like, Alura."

"I'm not really sure what to do, Sheriff."

"Well, he'll have to be buried or cremated or something. I can get someone to arrange for a funeral."

"Can we just bury him here? Paps' favorite fishing spot was in the shade of that lone willow down by the spring. Couldn't we just bury him there?"

The judge interrupted, "Not without being embalmed, little lady. State Law."

"I'll transport him to the funeral parlor in Las Vegas, if you want. That is the closest place."

"Paps was a member of the Navajo tribe. I am not sure what their traditions are."

"Let me take the body and get the Judge home. I'll come back up tomorrow and we can discuss the next step. I'll even get on the phone to the Navajo Council to see what they suggest. That sound OK?"

"I guess," Alura said. "I am just tired right now. I just can't think."

"It has been a stressful day and not really something a little gal like you should have had to bother with anyway," the Judge said. "Do as the Sheriff says and allow him to take the body on to the funeral parlor. You'll have a clearer head tomorrow, I'm sure. I really do need to be getting back to my wife. She's

not well and she worries so if I'm out too late."

"I'm sorry. I guess that would really be best. See you tomorrow, then, Sheriff."

"Another thing I thought we ought to talk about, Alura, and something you might want to start giving some thought to is your living arrangements. I don't really think a young girl like you ought to be living up here all alone and we will, necessarily, have to consult the State about your situation."

"I am almost 17," Alura said, "I am able to take care of myself just fine. According to Paps, I was able to live on my own when I was 12."

The judge interrupted, "The law says you are not an adult until you turn 18, though, and you cannot live alone unless you can convince a judge that you are, indeed, capable of caring for yourself."

"But aren't you a judge? Can't you see that I can take care of myself?"

"If it was up to me, there would be no problem. I am only a JP, sweetie. A District Judge is required to approve your living without adult supervision."

"Don't fret about it now, Alura," the Sheriff interjected. "That can wait until tomorrow, but I wanted you to start thinking about it. Let me get the body out of here and you and I can figure out the rest of it in the morning, OK?"

"I guess," said Alura.

"Well, glad that we got that settled. Now, why don't you go on inside and get some rest now. As far as the body goes, I can handle it from here. Do you mind if I take the tarp?"

"What for?" Alura asked.

"I'd just like to wrap him up in it so's I won't damage the body when I hoist it up to carry it to the truck. I'll bring it back tomorrow, I promise."

"I guess that's not so important, anyhow. Sure, take the tarp."

As Alura turned to go back around the front of the cabin, Sheriff Martinez lifted the body and slid one end of the tarp underneath and rolled the body inside the tarp. A big, fit, strong man, 6'2" and 245 lbs., the Sheriff easily hoisted the tarp-wrapped body onto his shoulder. "Can you guide me? Just shine the light so I don't trip over nothin'." Sheriff Martinez tossed the flashlight to the Judge, who had merely stood and watched the Sheriff's actions up to that point. Fumbling as he caught it, the JP eventually gained control of the light.

"Sure," said the judge, as he turned to lead the way back to the Blazer. The Sheriff, toting the lifeless body across his left shoulder, followed close on his heels, finding quickly that the slow-moving judge mostly impeded his progress. They eventually arrived

at the Blazer.

"Judge. I really don't want to lay the body back down on the ground. Think you might open the back up for me so I can lay the body down in there?"

"I am sorry, Sheriff. Please realize that I'm not usually part of this end of the business. I'm afraid I ain't thinking too clearly right now, either."

"No problem, Judge. Just open it, please. The body is dead weight and I need to lay it down."

The judge rounded quickly to the rear of the vehicle and, first lifting the window, lowered the tailgate. Promptly stepping back, he shined the light into the rear of the Blazer. Once the way was cleared and illuminated, Sheriff rounded the truck and placed the body into the rear bed of the Blazer. "Not gonna get him in unless I lower that forward seat."

"I'm not real sure how to do that."

"No problem, just come hold his feet until I do it."

"Do I have to?"

"He's dead, Judge. He ain't gonna bite you."

The Judge stepped forward to hold the dead man's feet, thereby relieving the Sheriff to open a door, release a catch, and allow the seat back to tip forward. Upon completion of that task, Sheriff

Martinez relieved the judge. "Thanks Judge," he said, as he pushed the body forward and closed up the back of the Blazer. He then looked toward the dark cabin and saw no signs of life.

Assuming that Alura had long since gone to bed, he said, "OK, let's get out of here." The pair then climbed back into their respective seats before Sheriff Martinez steered the Blazer through a U-turn in the meadow and headed it back toward Jackrabbit Draw.

Standing in the shadows on the porch, Alura had silently watched the loading of the body into the back of the Sheriff's vehicle. She had continued to watch as the truck carrying Paps' remains drove out of sight. She let out a long breath of relief when they had finally crossed the ridge and were out of sight. She had begun to feel uncomfortable with all that talk about her needing to convince a judge that she could care for herself. However, she was also she was also relieved that someone else had taken charge of Pap's dead body.

Alura was already thinking about what had been said. She was not too young to care for herself, she knew, and the fact that others might decide that she was unable to do so now annoyed her greatly. Over the years, Paps had worked so hard to fill her with confidence in her abilities and she had always been secure in that belief. Why should she have to prove herself before a court?

She found herself apprehensive of being paraded in

front of some judge who knew nothing of her. Alura had read enough different accounts of court proceedings to have developed a feeling of uneasiness in appearing in a courtroom.

Mostly, however, Alura simply felt that she was the person who was most capable of determining what was best for herself. *But what is best for me?* she thought. *Should I simply sit defiantly in the cabin until I am forcefully removed?* That idea was impractical, she decided. *Should I just take my chances with the Judge?* While that idea did seem practical, her apprehension about appearing in court nagged deeply inside of her.

Alura silently stared out at the moonlit meadow, continuously imagining every possible alternative scenario, but additional solutions to her dilemma, however, failed to come forth.

Suddenly, the silence of the still night was broken by the drone of one of those distance trucks echoing off of the surrounding mountains. Its air horn made a forlorn call to the night. Alura imagined that it sounded just exactly like she felt-- low and lonesome. Its song, however, awakened within her the seeds to a plan.

No sooner had the thought entered into Alura's mind than she came to a decision. She would leave this place on the mesa. She would abandon the only home she had ever known. She imagined that she would likely be unable to stay here, anyway, for now.

She was quite sure that no one else would be willing to live in this remote location. Since it was evident that she'd have to start life in a different place, why not just disappear and find her own life somewhere else. Alura would leave the mesa at the break of dawn.

The most isolated regions within driving distance of her current location, Alura knew, were in the tall mountains to the north. She decided to make that her destination and began to make preparations. Entering the cabin, she lit a lantern. *What would I need on my journey?*

Alura gathered the 30.06 hunting rifle, two full boxes of shells, two blankets, the 40 lb. bow with accompanying quiver of arrows, and the hunting knife, complete with sheath. These items, she knew, properly equipped her to hunt every manner of wild game.

She wrapped the rifle, bow, and quiver in the blankets. She slid the sheathed knife into the lower right leg pocket of her striped carpenter's overalls. With her bundle tossed over her left shoulder and the shells clutched under her right arm, Alura toed open the door to the cabin and carried her load across the meadow to the truck.

Alura opened the truck door and tilted the seat back forward. Behind the seat of the truck, she stowed the boxes of shells and the blanket-wrapped parcel. After pushing the seat back into place, Alura slid the knife

into a crevice just behind the seat, a spot, if necessary, she could easily reach.

Walking several yards to the smaller utility shed, Alura's eyes panned across its interior and scanned its contents. Spying the camp shovel, she decided would need it to dig fire pits. After removing it from the hook upon which it was hung, she also lifted two tarpaulins off of the same stack where she gotten the one used to cover Paps' body. The tarps could be used to make a shelter. Rolling the shovel up inside of the tarps, she carried the bundle to the truck, gently placing it into the bed.

Alura returned to the utility shed for another quick check for anything she might need that had been overlooked. *The minnow net*, she thought upon spying it, *would be useful*. She was reminded, as well, that she had not packed any of the fishing gear. After fetching and stowing the fishing gear in the truck, Alura paused briefly for reflection.

Crossing again to the cabin, Alura reseated herself in the porch swing, relaxed, and stared into the night sky. *Am I being foolish? Surely a wise old Judge would not allow any harm to come to me. What could be the worst that could happen?* Mrs. Munoz had already invited her to stay there, if needed and, although Mr. Munoz was often grouchy, would it really be so bad living with Mr. and Mrs. Munoz for a spell? *Would it? Oh Paps, why did you have to die?* Alura tried very hard to hold back her tears but they refused to be stopped, this time. Soon, they flowed

in torrents.

For over an hour, Alura was overwhelmed by her grief. As she cried, little by little, she allowed herself to reflect upon those joyful memories of her carefree life with Paps. Such finally eased her anguish. A sense of peace was restored within her and the quiet and patient tutelage of Paps echoed in her mind.

Each lesson had begun with the words, "Now pay strict attention to what I am about to show you, because this is something that might come in handy later in your life. Always remember that if your skills are honed and your training adequate, you'll never find yourself facing a totally insurmountable obstacle."

But this is the greatest obstacle I have had to face yet, Paps, Alura silently called to his memory. *I do wish you were here to guide me in this decision.* From high atop the lone willow down by the spring, Alura heard the woeful hoot of an owl.

Under that willow had been one of Paps' favorite places to relax and often, Paps had spoken of his belief in the Great Owl Spirit. Despite his indoctrination into all things military, Paps had never abandoned those early Navajo spiritual beliefs.

Alura wondered about the coincidence of the presence of an owl in Paps' favorite place so soon after his death. Was it an omen or a sign of some sort? Could Paps' spirit be floating nearby, watching

her? She hoped so, and called to the owl. *Paps, what am I to do? Should I live with Mr. and Mrs. Munoz or is it time for me to go forth to fulfill that great destiny of mine of which you always spoke?*

He had once told her that an ill wind had blown away the better part of her family, leaving her unharmed. He had believed such foretold of a great destiny for Alura and had diligently prepared her for whatever greatness would eventually befall her. "A benevolent spirit watches over you, my girl," he had told her when she was nine years' old when she had implored him to describe the details of her parents' deaths. "The Great Spirits have special plans for your life. Of that, I am sure."

Seemingly responsive to her pleas, the owl let loose a very loud hoot and left its perch in the tree grove. It lifted aloft and flew in her direction. In a flurry of feathery wings, beating hard against the air, the owl, huge, white tinged with light gray, slowed to land on the porch railing across from where she sat. It stared intently at Alura with deep dark black eyes. With an equal intensity, Alura stared back into those dark, very familiar, eyes.

"Paps? Is that you?" she asked. Her mind told her that did not seem likely. However, the emphasis that Paps had put upon his beliefs made it extremely difficult to ignore the possibility. Alura reached out to caress the beautiful bird and stroked it softly with her fingertips for a few minutes. The owl again hooted loudly and it left. It took to wing and, as Alura

watched, it circled the roof of the old GMC twice. It then flew north, disappearing into the night.

Alura refused to ignore the implications of the owl's actions. *Thanks, Paps, for the sign that I needed.* She then stood and went into the cabin. She gathered her few items of clothing, the few family pictures, and some strips of the dried venison that hung in the larder. She crammed them into a backpack. *Money! I am going to need some money.*

Alura carried the lantern to a place in the floor just to the left of the fireplace. Moving the table aside, she slid back the rug, exposing the bare floorboards. As Paps had done, previous to every trip into the valley, she lifted three of these floor boards, exposing the door to a safe. Although he had always shielded its contents from her view, he had made no secret that it contained money. Alura hoped there was enough inside for her current needs.

Now what is that combination? Despite keeping the amount of his stash secret, Paps had foreseen a need to provide her with the safe's combination: "In case something should ever happen to me, you'll need to have access to the contents of the safe." She remembered that the combination was a date. *But what date?* Alura thought. She attempted to recall the circumstances surrounding Paps' disclosure. *War! It had something to do with war ... and death.*

As if by magic, such recollection brought the rest of Paps' words back to Alura: "The combination is the

date of the beginning of the American involvement in World War II. Remember that and you will always know the combination. Always remember that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The combination to the safe is 12-7-19-41."

Alura spun the dial to 12 then to 7 followed by 19 then back to 41. She turned the handle exactly as Paps had done and the door to the safe opened. The safe was crammed literally full of money! Inside, Alura was amazed at the amount of money in that safe. Inside were stacks and stacks of \$100 bills. *It must be a million dollars.*

Alura had no clue as to how much money she might need. Most of the bills were banded together, so Alura removed one of the banded stacks from the top and closed the door. The band said "Five Thousand Dollars." Alura thought that should be plenty. If not, she always knew where to get more.

Alura stowed the money in her left hip pocket, then, as she had seen Paps do, she returned the handle to its original position and spun the dial before placing the boards, the rug, and the table back into position. *I am almost ready,* she thought.

Carrying the lantern to the main table, Alura looked among a stack of magazines near Paps' favorite chair. Finding the one she wanted, she thumbed through the pages until she located the information she sought. Onto the top sheet of a nearby pad of paper, Alura copied: "Ethel Azala, 223 West 9th,

Denver, Colorado.”

CHAPTER THREE

For the second time in as many attempts, Alura reached the bottom of the canyon without incident. She had begun her trip in accordance with her earlier plans, at the crack of dawn, when there had been just enough light to illuminate the roadway. The sun was still only barely peeking above the mountaintops when the Munoz store came into view. She drove across the small meadow and parked in front.

It was very early and the store had not yet opened. Mrs. Munoz, hearing the sound of the slamming truck door, peered down from her second story bedroom window. As the locals were well aware of the store's business hours, most early morning disturbances at the store usually involved visiting hunting parties, eager to begin the hunt. Early arrival of outsiders was common enough, however, that Mrs. Munoz was well practiced in chastising them from her bedroom window. "My husband's still asleep," she would say in response to their disturbance of her grouchy husband's early morning snoozefest.

Upon spying Alura, however, Mrs. Munoz felt both

shock and surprise. She lifted the window and yelled down, "Alura, sweetie, give me just a minute to get presentable and I'll be right down. Have a seat on the veranda."

Alura lifted her face upward toward Mrs. Munoz and smiled. Waving, she said, "Sorry to come at this early hour, Mrs. Munoz, but I wanted to complete my business as soon as possible. I'm wanting to arrive at my aunt's house in Denver by a reasonable hour. She's not expecting me."

"You have an aunt in Denver? That is marvelous! Be down in a jiff," Mrs. Munoz said, pushing the window shut with a resounding thud.

Alura climbed up onto the big wide porch that fronted the ground floor of the building. The large whitewashed wood frame building served as the area's only store. Alura, still weary from the previous day's events, allowed her body to melt onto the porch swing. Before she had gotten comfortable, the front door to the store was flung open and it slammed against the wall of the building. Mrs. Munoz, her head full of curlers, was clad only in a quilted bathrobe.

Alura began to rise, but Mrs. Munoz waved her back into her seat. In a few short steps, the short, plump lady crossed the short distance to sit beside her. "So, tell me about this aunt. I hadn't ever heard any mention of any aunt before."

"Last night, after the Sheriff left, I was searching the cabin for some clue about what preparations Paps had made for me in case of his untimely death and I discovered an old yellowed envelope Paps had slipped between the pages of the Bible." Alura hated lying, especially to a dear trusted friend like Mrs. Munoz, but she had practiced this lie all the way down the mountain in hopes of sounding convincing. She had halfheartedly, herself, almost begun to believe that the story was true. "Inside of the envelope was a an old letter. It said that should anything ever happen to Paps, I was welcome to go live with my Aunt Ethel in Denver. I've got her address written down right here." Alura patted the breast pocket of the overalls.

"Are you sure she is still alive? Are you sure that the address is current? If there is a phone number, I would be pleased to allow you to use our phone to call."

"No phone number and no knowledge other than what is written. I know it sounds a bit risky, but it is a risk that I am wanting to take at this point. You can understand that, can't you, Mrs. Munoz?"

"Yes, I suppose I can. Don't they always say that blood is thicker than water, so I guess that is great news, Alura. I am happy that you are not all alone in the world, after all. And if things don't work out for you in Denver, though, I had a long discussion about you with Henry last evening. We both agreed to make a home for you here, if need be. We talked pretty late into the wee hours of the morning about

how to make you welcome in our home. I, myself, was especially looking forward to having you around."

"That is so sweet, Mrs. Munoz. I am really going to miss you, you know?"

"I will miss you too, sweetie. You have always been the closest thing to my own child. I will miss having you around." She paused, looking at Alura, before continuing, "I am still so very, very sad for your loss."

"You have always been a great help to me, Mrs. Munoz. Oh, I also wanted to return your books before I left. Following my talk with the Sheriff, I will want to get started to Denver and am not sure when I will get back here."

"Oh, sweetie, those books are not a problem. You can't have finished them already! You only just took 'em a few days ago."

"No, I was only starting to read the first one, when ... well ... you know."

"Then you take them with you. Finish them. Just pass them off to someone else when you are done with them. Books are to be read, and 'cept for you and me, there ain't much call for reading material in this area."

"Thanks, Mrs. Munoz. I also wanted to see about filling the tank on the truck."

“Well, why don’t you come on in and let me fix you some breakfast. It’ll take me a minute or two to rouse Henry. We can have us a nice plate of ham and eggs while he tops off your tank.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Munoz. I haven’t had a bit to eat since breakfast yesterday. Since you mentioned it, I am a bit hungry.”

Mrs. Munoz rose up and reached out for Alura’s hand. “Come on child-- the morning air is a bit nippy, even in late July.”

Although, again, she rankled to be called a child, Alura smiled and clasped Mrs. Munoz’ hand. The pair crossed the porch and entered the store. The store’s interior was filled with a massive assortment of varying products. Alura had always loved prowling around, investigating the properties and reading all of the accompanying documentation attached to the various items found on the shelves, walls and hanging from the ceiling of the store: camping gear; fishing gear; hunting gear; clothing; canned food; snacks; and, of course, the large glass-fronted vault that contained beer, wine, soft drinks, sandwiches, milk, cheese, and meats. There were two glass-topped chest freezers that housed an assortment of ice cream and frozen foods. One rack held sunglasses and another held an assortment of caps and other headgear. One complete aisle had been dedicated to various types of automotive products while another was dedicated to candy.

There was a barrel of dried beans, another of rice, several with different varieties of flour. Behind the counter were drugs, medicines, and remedies of every lawful sort, as well as tobacco products. There were ropes, tarps, farming utensils, cooking utensils. "Almost anything a person might need," Mr. Munoz, proudly, had once said. Some of the things that hung on the walls, Alura was sure, dated from a time before she was born.

During their sporadic excursions for supplies, Alura had always been allowed to choose one special treat. As a young child, she had always run straight to the candy aisle or to the ice cream box, but, as she grew older, she had lost the sweet tooth and had always chosen something of a more practical nature.

"Follow me," said Mrs. Munoz, stepping behind the counter and through a curtained doorway. Alura obeyed and followed the slightly obese older lady up a narrow stairway to the second floor of the building. Although she had often been in the store, Alura had never previously been invited to visit the upper floor.

At the other end of the stairway was a small compact kitchen. A propane stove was stationed against one wall. A counter containing a double sink, with cabinets both above and below, lined another wall. An ancient refrigerator stood next to a second doorway that connected the kitchen to the remainder of the living quarters. In the center of the kitchen floor sat an old chrome and Formica table surrounded by mismatched chrome and vinyl chairs.

“Have a seat at the table. Let me go rouse Henry and I will be back in a jiff to begin working on that breakfast I promised.”

Alura did as instructed and sat at the table. She stared after the older woman as she moved through the portal next to the refrigerator.

Alura could distinguish the voices of Mr. and Mrs. Munoz as they conversed somewhere beyond the kitchen door, but she was unable to understand their words. From the tone of Mr. Munoz’ voice, however, it appeared that he displeased at having been roused from his bed at this early hour. Alura had always believed that his demeanor was a bit on the sour side, so very unlike his sweet, cheerful spouse. Although she had not been conscious of it at the time, she now wondered if his grouchiness had been a decisive factor in her eventual decision to leave this area.

Mrs. Munoz reappeared in the doorway. “Henry wanted me to ask you if you have the keys or are they in the truck.”

“I left the key in the truck, Mrs. Munoz.”

Mrs. Munoz, still standing in the doorway, turned and yelled, “They’re in the truck, Henry.” His reply was unintelligible.

Alura watched and waited as the older woman busily moved about the kitchen fixing breakfast. After a few

moments, a plate containing a huge slice of ham and a healthy portion of scrambled eggs was set down before Alura. She had felt her appetite grow quite strong as her nose absorbed the aromas of the cooking food and, as she began to quickly shovel the food into her mouth, a glass of milk was placed next to her plate. With a mouthful of eggs, Alura muttered, "This is great, Mrs. Munoz. You are an excellent cook."

Mrs. Munoz beamed, but said, "Hard to ruin ham and eggs, sweetie, but glad you like 'em. You were hungry, though, I can tell."

Alura sliced off a big bite of ham and placed it in her mouth. She chewed it and took a swallow of milk, before scooping up another forkful of eggs. She watched across as the older woman ate, as well. They both ate silently, each quickly consuming most of what was on their plate. Alura placed her fork across her plate and said, "Oh, I needed that! Thank you so very much, Mrs. Munoz. You are such an angel."

"I do believe you are the angel, my dear. And with all that you have gone through since yesterday, it seems the least I can do." She rose, grasped a plate in each hand and laid them in the sink with the skillet. She downed the last swallow of milk in her glass as she stood, before also placing it in the sink. "Would you like another glass of milk, Alura?"

"No, thanks, Mrs. Munoz. What I really need now is

coffee," Alura stated before noticing Mrs. Munoz was waiting for her empty glass to place among the other dirtied items already in the sink, so Alura drained the last swallow from her glass and handed it to the older lady.

"Well, Henry will be wanting some coffee, as well, so let's get down to the store and get a pot a'brewing. It won't take but a sec." Alura rose and joined Mrs. Munoz.

The pair crossed to the stairway and descended to the store where they found Mr. Munoz, already standing behind the counter sipping coffee from a mug. "Coffee's ready, ladies, and your truck has been topped off, Alura. I checked the water, oil and the air in the tires for you, as well. You should not have any problems getting it to take you all the way to Denver, but you really ought to get that power steering looked at. It is a booger bear to turn."

Mrs. Munoz crossed over to the coffee maker and dispensed two cups of coffee, while Alura asked, "How much do I owe you, Mr. Munoz?"

Enrico Munoz began to tally the sale on the register. "Let's see, 10.3 gallons of gas at \$2.29.9 and one quart of Quaker State 30 weight, comes to a grand total of \$26.08"

"Be sure to take out for my coffee, and charge whatever you think is fair for that lovely breakfast Mrs. Munoz fixed for me," Alura said as she began to

reach into her pocket for the packet of bills.

"No, no, no charge to you, Alura!" hollered Mrs. Munoz from where she still stood next to the coffee maker. "Our treat, sweetie. Glad to be able to do some little thing for you, after all you have been through, right Henry?"

"Whatever you say, dear," stated Mr. Munoz, cringing at his thought of that additional bit of profit he'd lost because of the generosity of his wife.

"So, Alura, would you like cream and sugar?"

Alura turned and said, "Both, please."

Mr. Munoz handed Alura a steaming cup of coffee and Alura blew across the top of the cup, scattering the cloud of steam amassed over the hot liquid, and took a sip.

"Thanks to you both for all of your help and kindness. I just wanted to tell you how much I've always enjoyed coming to the store. Ever since I was a little kid, I thought this store was the greatest place in the world ... and other than Paps, you two were the kindest people I knew. I am really going to miss you both."

"Be careful on your trip, sweetie," Mrs. Munoz said. Alura waved and began to walk to the door.

"Good luck, Alura," Mr. Munoz muttered.

Alura waved once more before finally stepping through the door. The truck was parked in front of the store, where she had left it, with the keys in it. Without realizing it, Alura, prior to opening the door, glanced over her belongings so as to assure herself that nothing had been disturbed.

Alura had been surprised that Mr. and Mrs. Munoz had not accepted her money, but then again, they were likely unaware that she had such a large amount. Alura pulled the packet of money from her pocket, tipped the back of the seat forward, and slipped the packet inside the blanket with the rifle. After returning it to its original position, she climbed into the seat, cranked the engine and drove off in the direction of the Sheriff's Office.

Alura stopped at the intersection as she eyed another big truck coming up the road from the south. After it passed, she crossed the road, but looked down the road after the truck. *Soon I will be going in the same direction.*

Alura parked, half expecting the Sheriff to come darting out of the door as before. She had not noticed the Blazer parked alongside the building, however, so she stepped from the truck, approached the door and tried it. It was locked. A note taped to the door read: "Office will be closed until 11:00 a.m."

Alura was unaware of the exact hour, but guessed it was not yet 9:00 a.m. She was not anxious to wait here until 11:00 in order to repeat her lie to the

Sheriff. Alura had spent considerable time composing in her head the exact words which she planned to use to explain her actions to the Sheriff. Now finding the office closed, she actually felt relieved that Sheriff Martinez was out as she had not been thoroughly convinced, if pressed to answer his questions, that he could not uncover her deception. She would simply leave it to Mrs. Munoz to supply him with the information.

Alura climbed up into the truck, backed it up and headed north. She was elated to finally be heading down the two lane ribbons of asphalt, eager to visit places which she had never seen before.

CHAPTER FOUR

Although she had no clue as to what would or could be found ahead, Alura headed north along the two-lane highway. Oncoming traffic was sporadic and, since leaving the Sheriff's Office, Alura had not spotted a solitary vehicle of any sort traveling in her direction.

Because the speedometer was inoperable, Alura could not gauge her speed, but she was sure it was not excessive. She had quite easily managed to shift out of granny gear and through the range of other gears. She had shifted the truck's transmission into its highest gear. The road was smooth and the drive was pleasant.

Alura gazed out at the scenery to either side of the old GMC pickup. The surrounding countryside was so very similar to that which had enveloped the cabin on the mountain-- tall pine forests with intermittent meadows. Occasionally, Alura could catch sight of a structure of some sort or another through breaks in the trees.

Alura knew that there were cities to be found. She had learned facts about cities in many of the books she had read: forests of tall buildings instead of forests of trees-- areas filled with people instead of remote areas where people were few and far between. However, for mile after mile, it was the same old scenery.

After a very long boring hour of driving, Alura came upon the outskirts of a small community. It was not as small, however, as that which encircled the Munoz store in the valley.

A trio of young men was standing on the side of the road next to another old pickup truck. As Alura passed, one of the young men waved at her, beckoning. Alura was unsure of the purpose of his motion, but it did appear to be an indication that he wanted her to pull over. Alura slowed, took another long look at the group of young men, and decided that they appeared harmless enough. *Maybe they are in need of some assistance*, she thought. *Surely, the neighborly thing to do would be to stop and offer help*. She turned her old GMC truck off of the road and it came to a stop several feet from where the other truck was parked.

Alura had just begun to climb out of the cab of the GMC when she first noticed that all of the young men were holding cans of beer. Paps had always warned her that "young men drinking beer are usually up to no good." Alura had always thought it wise to heed Paps' advice, but she had never actually been around

any young men drinking beer. Still, with Pap's words swimming in her head, Alura warily approached the group.

"Is there something wrong with your truck? Do you need some help?" Alura asked, as she approached. Each member of the group was dark skinned, like Paps, but unlike Pap's close cropped locks, these boys all had a heads full of dark, long, lank hair. Each was dressed in clothes that were extremely filthy, with all manner of ground-in dirt, oil, and grime. Alura was sure that they had seen better days.

"Naw," the largest one of them, the one wearing the orange T-shirt, said, "We was just havin' a party. We seen a pretty chica like you, all by yourself, drive by and we thought you might like to party with us." He extended his hand toward Alura, offering a can of beer.

"I don't drink beer," Alura said. Another of the young men, this one wearing a blue button-down shirt opened to the waist, began to circle around to her rear. Out of the corner of her eye, Alura silently observed his progress. The two men to her front also crept closer. She lost sight of the other one, but could sense that he was also closing in on her backside.

"Well obviously you don't need any assistance from me. Sorry, guys, but I do have much better things to do right now than to play your silly games." She could feel the hot breath of the young man on her

bare neck. "I think I had better be going, now," Alura said, as she attempted to turn and move back toward her truck. The young man behind her placed his strong, muscular arm around Alura's throat.

He pulled her into him. "You're gonna stay right here and party with us, little girl," he said, his mouth pressed up against her ear. Alura could, again, feel his hot breath and she caught a whiff of the stale odor of beer.

The larger kid, the one wearing the orange T-shirt, moved his face up close to hers and Alura could smell the beer on his breath, as well. "So, chica, what's your name?"

Alura said nothing and responded solely with the hard cold stare of her lipid blue eyes. When the kid failed to back away, she said, "My advice is that you and your friends let me go-- before someone gets hurt."

At her threat, the orange T-shirted boy laughed naughtily. "But you ain't goin' nowhere until we have our little party, girl," the third member of the group, who wore no shirt, finally spoke. He reached over and gave Alura's arm a squeeze. Alura felt sickened at his touch.

The large one, still face-to-face with Alura, said, "Come on, Paco, pull her over into the trees." The two boys to her front began to move toward the tree line, to her right. Alura felt the arm across her throat tighten as Paco attempted to persuade her, also, to

move to the right. Alura tired of the nonsense and lifted her right foot high. She then drove the heel of her boot down hard onto the foot of the young man behind her. He yelped in pain and loosened his grip. When she felt his grip loosen, Alura forcefully drove her left elbow backward into the soft body of the boy called Paco, which doubled him over. Alura then turned, took a hold of his arm and jerked the boy forward over her jutted out hip. The simple judo flip propelled the young man head over heels onto the ground a few feet from where she stood.

Before the other two men could react, Alura retreated to the driver's side door of her truck. She opened the door, yet did not climb inside. The physical exercise was actually proving to be a pleasant distraction and somewhat invigorating. She took up a defensive posture and readied herself for their next attack.

"Heh-heh, we got us a live filly here, boys. Let's get her."

Paco was still picking himself off the ground when the other two charged at her. Alura leapt forward to meet their assault and jumped high up into the air, kicking out with her right leg. The bottom of her boot connected with the nose of the large orange-shirted man. He screamed and fell backwards, becoming entangled with the rising Paco. The two of them tumbled to the ground in a heap.

Alura then swung around to her left quickly, dragging her leg across the ground. Her leg action clipped the

shirtless guy behind his knees. They buckled and he also crumpled to the ground. Alura stepped over him, rounded the front of her truck and resumed her position just outside the open door of the GMC.

Alura had tried not to injure anyone and all three men had quickly recovered. Alura felt sure that they would find themselves thoroughly outmatched and abort their attack. These boys, however, were now scuffed and mad. As Alura watched, they grouped again to attack her position. She could now smell their anger and began to fear that the situation could possibly escalate quickly to an unmanageable level if she did not quickly put an end to it all.

Quickly, Alura reached behind the truck seat, slipped the big hunting knife out of its sheath and held it high so that everyone in the group could see it. In order to make her point, she stepped from behind the door of the truck. Holding the knife by the blade, Alura lifted it over her head. "I have had enough of this," she said, "Which one of you wants to die first?"

The group, which had been tentatively creeping nearer and nearer to where Alura stood, suddenly ceased their approach. They stood a mere few feet from where Alura stood. Their eyes darted from her face to the knife and back to her face. The largest one smiled and said, "We was only playin' with ya gal. You didn't have to pull out no knife."

While he spoke, Alura watched his hands as he furiously searched his pockets. *Does he have a gun?*

In a fast fluid movement, Alura flipped the knife so as to clutch it by the handle and slowly pirouetted with her outstretched arm swinging the knife in a graceful arc. The result of her dance-like movement was that the blade of her knife had sliced across the chest of the orange-shirted boy. He had finally extracted his own knife from his pocket when he felt the cool air hit his bare chest. Assuming that he been cut, he quickly flung away his knife and clutched his chest with both hands, exploring his chest for signs of injury.

He discovered himself to be uninjured although his orange T-shirt was hanging loosely with a long diagonal gash sliced across its front. A large portion of the man's dark skinned chest was now exposed to the open air. Alura's knife, as planned, had never come into contact with the young man's skin.

The other two froze when Alura brandished her knife, They had not moved, but had simply watched the whole scene in disbelief. They had been amazed at how quickly and easily Alura had slashed and then quickly returned to where she had begun. It had all been a blur that somehow seemed to have occurred in slow motion. Unbeknownst to Alura, the shirtless one had soiled himself.

"That was your final warning," Alura stated flatly, looking upon the three with her cold blue stare. "The next one of you that moves will be needing more than a new shirt. Somebody's blood will be spilled and I'll guarantee you that it won't be mine."

None of the boys smiled at this threat. As a group, they inched backward, tiny step by tiny step, keeping their eyes affixed on Alura, until they had reached a point of relative safety. Then, the smallest among them, the shirtless boy, said, "You ain't from anywhere around here, are ya?"

"Nope," said Alura. She crawled into the seat of her truck. "And I'm not staying," she said out of the open window as she cranked up the truck and pulled it back onto the roadway. She continued on through the little town.

Casually, with very little interest, Alura scanned the little town as she drove through. She saw nothing remarkable, just a lot of dingy little houses set upon patches of bare dirt. Here and there she spotted tiny groups of grimy little children, playing in the dirt. They all seemed to kick a goodly portion of the dirt into the air, and it hung close to the ground. The village appeared to be cloaked in a shroud of utter squalor.

Alura quickly concluded that there was nothing about this town she liked. She wondered why people would live in such a place and soon passed out of the little community without making another stop.