

CHAPTER TWO

There was no indication of a storm on the horizon. The surface of Douglas Pond was calm while Mariel paddled her board toward the cabin, the surrounding trees and low mountain reflected in its calm surface. She had made the loop around the small lake with Jughead, her Chesapeake Bay Retriever, lazing at the front of her paddle board. The large retriever had been taking this ride with her since he was a half-grown pup. Now, at three years old, he was at ease on the slim watercraft and he usually was well-behaved, but this morning he nearly sent Mariel into the water when he stiffened and stood, his muzzle angled upward and his ears nearly standing erect. The tight curls along his dark gold back rose to stiff bristles.

“Jug!” Mariel reprimanded, using the long paddle to save herself from falling off the board. “What the hell?” Mariel looked up just as a funnel cloud appeared out of nowhere in the blue sky. “What ... ?” This was impossible. This was dangerous.

They were still a couple hundred feet from the shore when the wind struck them and both went off the paddle board. Mariel let go of the paddle as the waves rose around her and she clung to the board. With the wind and waves came a loud clap of thunder, and it sounded like an explosion. Mariel’s mind went numb with fear and remembering as her heart rate accelerated. PTSD. She had moved to her grandfather’s cabin on the obscure pond in the Maine woods to get away from it. She had moved here to forget what could never be forgotten. The wind, waves, and thunder of the sudden cyclone brought back the terrifying memory of the explosion that had changed her life forever. Mariel clung to the board without thought, without consciousness of what she was doing. Something large splashed into the water near her, pulling her out of herself.

“Jughead?” she called, thinking it was her dog. “Jughead!” She looked around but couldn’t see him, and she feared the worst. Then she heard him bark from the shore. He had swum to safety.

The cyclone that had risen so suddenly dissipated in the same way. It stopped and the sun shone as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. The water calmed and the wind died away. Mariel looked up as the tail of the funnel disappeared into nothingness, leaving the warming May morning as it had been. Mariel clung to her board in the cold water, disoriented and shivering. Jughead barked again, gaining her attention, and swam out to her. He pushed his nose into her face, urging her to move.

“Coming, Jug,” she said through chattering teeth. Mariel looked around to get her bearings. The episodes always left her confused. She had hauled herself onto the board to hand-paddle to shore when she spotted the body in the water near her. “Oh my god!” Mariel froze again, but Jughead took action. Seeing the body, he swam to it and whined, nudging it with his nose. Mariel was shocked to see a hand rise from the water in response. No man left behind! Mariel’s military training kicked in and she paddled to the man to pull him onto the board.

The man was bleeding from his back and from the back of his head, and the blood, unusually dark, was spreading in the water. He was unusually dressed, having some sort of fabric attached to his clothing that spread on both sides of his floating body, and he was wearing wide copper bands on both wrists. Mariel tried to pull the fabric away from his body so she could get her arm around him, but the slippery fiber was firmly attached. She moved it aside as well as she could and slid her arm around the man’s torso to raise his head from the water.

“Pull, Jug!” she called to the dog, tossing the tether attached to her board to him. Jughead, a powerful swimmer, grabbed the cord in his teeth and swam toward the shore, pulling the paddle board with him as he was trained to do. Mariel paddled with her left hand to help him while

holding the man's body with her right arm. When the board was in shallow water she set her right foot down to gain her balance and she dragged the man to the shore, trailing the odd garment through the water. He was surprisingly light and she had no trouble pulling him onto the dry land. That was when she realized there had been no rain with the freakish cyclone, only the wind that had blown leaves and debris all over the place. "What the hell is going on?" she wondered, then she attended to the man lying at her feet.

He was face down, his head turned to the side, revealing a fine profile. His hair was long and black and part of it was plaited into an intricate pattern of braids that were held in place with gold retainers. The tattered shirt was brilliant blue and sleeveless, revealing a set of long sculpted arms, and his pants were black. He was wearing a pair of tall boots that appeared to be made of fiber other than leather. And he was tall, well over six feet. Mariel knelt to check his pulse. It was slow. The back of the shirt was shredded and covered with blood and those fiber strips were still attached. Mariel laid her hand on his back and felt what she thought were broken ribs protruding under his skin.

Mariel felt the surge of panic begin to rise again. This was the kind of injury a car bomb inflicted. Her hands shook and she began to hyperventilate. Jughead moved close to her and pushed his muzzle into her hands. His presence calmed her and she drew slow breaths to regain control of her emotions. This man needed help and there was no one else near her remote cabin. Mariel's hands were still shaking when she ripped the tattered shirt open to assess his injuries. That's when she discovered the fiber strips were not part of his attire. Mariel nearly peed her pants.

"No!" she gasped. "This can't be!"

The four lengths of fiber were not attached to his clothing, and the protrusions on his back were not broken bones, though she suspected from the horrendous bruising of his torso that he did have broken ribs. There were four distinct ridges on his back, two on each side, and the strips were anchored in them. They were two pairs of translucent, pale blue-veined wings like those she had seen on the dragonflies that inhabited the lakeside, except these wings were nearly four feet long. The texture appeared similar to latex and they lay in long flaccid ribbons on his body and at his sides. Two of the wings appeared crumpled and were partially shredded and bleeding.

"Who the hell are you?" Mariel whispered. "What are you?"

"Meálla." The man barely whispered the word. "Léim, a Meálla! Léim!" His eyelids fluttered and his hands twitched, then his body stiffened. He cried out in pain at the sudden tightening of his lacerated muscles, then he became still.

He was still breathing.

Jughead, normally aloof with strangers as was common with his breed, was acting strangely. He stood over the man, pressing his nose to him and whining, his tail low and wagging. His vocalizations were anxious but friendly, which further confused Mariel. He had never shown concern for anyone but her and Cathy, the veterinarian who ran Wild Haven, the wildlife sanctuary nearby, and their friends Mark and James, but he clearly was concerned for this strange being who seemingly had fallen out of the cyclone. Jughead looked at her and whined again.

"Yeah, he needs help," Mariel conceded. "We need to get him to a doctor." She had Dr. George Hammond in mind, as he had been a good friend to Joseph 'Gray Wolf' Dana, her grandfather, but she realized there was a problem with getting medical help for this man. She was sure she could get him into the back seat of the Jeep, but how would Dr. Hammond react to seeing a man with wings? "Oh god, old Doc might have a stroke seeing this! I feel like I'm about to have one! What can we do, Jug?" Mariel looked at the dog and knew there was only one person she

could call for help. “Cathy. Poor Cathy! She’s never seen a critter like this one! Stay, Jug.”

Mariel ran to the cabin and pulled a clean blanket and sheet from the trunk by the bed, then she went to the shed to get the long plastic sled she used to drag firewood from the stack to the cabin for winter heating. She brought them to the shore and set the sled beside the man, spreading the blanket across it. With the sled pushed close to his body, Mariel was able to roll him onto it, and that was when she noticed the finely engraved copper torque at his neck. She wrapped the blanket around him, then she tore the sheet into long strips and used them to wrap around him and the sled, tying them snugly to secure him to her makeshift stretcher. His legs protruded well beyond the end of the sled, but that couldn’t be helped. Mariel picked up the stout rope attached to the front of the sled and pulled, expecting the resistance to be far more than what she felt. He was definitely much lighter than a man his size should be.

“What are you, some kind of alien?” Mariel asked as she pulled the sled to the cabin. “Are you hostile? Did you come to attack us?” Mariel’s military training had kicked in again. “Where are you from?”

Mariel was able to pull the sled up the three short stairs of the porch and opened the door to her cabin, pulling the sled inside and into her bedroom, then she untied the sheet bindings. Her rustic log and plank bed thankfully was low and she was able to pull him onto it by kneeling on it and hooking her arms under his armpits. She rolled the lightweight body belly down and arranged the head on the pillow for comfort. The wings were in disarray and she cringed at the thought of touching them, but the wounded wings would have to be tended. Mariel tentatively slid her hands beneath one of the injured wings to lay it out straight. She was surprised at the warm smoothness of its texture which was pleasing to the touch. She had expected to be creeped out at handling them. She laid all four wings alongside his body, then she worked the lightweight boots from his feet, which had to be at least a size sixteen. Those bare feet hung off the end of the bed. She stepped back to study the strange being.

“You don’t look hostile,” she said, “but I can’t take a chance you aren’t.” Mariel used the sheeting strips to tie the man’s legs together, then she moved his arms so she could tie them to the heavy plank headboard. When he was secured, she cut the shredded shirt away from his torso. The deep lacerations looked like wounds she had seen on Marines and civilians in Iraq after explosions in battles. These were shrapnel wounds.

Mariel felt the panic rising again. Her vision narrowed and she felt faint. Jughead, who had sat nearby while she had secured the stranger, sensed it and pressed against her, whining to draw her attention. He licked her hands and bumped against her legs, drawing her from the fog of PTSD to the present. Mariel once again took deep, slow breaths as she had been taught and knelt to wrap her arms around the wet Chesapeake, rubbing her hands through his curly coat.

“Thanks, Jug,” she whispered, pressing her face into the thick, wet ruff around the dog’s neck. She stood and picked up her cell phone from the pine nightstand. Her hands shook as she scrolled to the number for Cathy and she tapped the icon.

“Wild Haven Sanctuary,” Cathy’s voice announced in just moments.

“Cathy!”

“Mariel?”

“Yeah. Cathy, I, uh, need you to come to the cabin ASAP. Please!” Mariel’s voice trembled as hard as her hands.

“Mariel! You sound afraid! What’s happened?”

“Um, an accident, sort of. Please come quickly, and bring everything you can think of. There will be a lot of stitching.” Mariel glanced at the lacerations on the winged back. “Cathy? Brace

yourself. This is ... weird.”

“Mariel? Is it Jughead? What do you mean by weird?” Cathy was sounding anxious.

“I can’t explain. Just please come!”

“On my way!”

Cathy Ballard, DVM, was the founder of Wild Haven Wildlife Sanctuary and ran a veterinary practice in the small township. She and Mariel had become friends when Jughead was brought to her small clinic for his vaccinations and a checkup. Cathy was aware of Mariel’s PTSD, and it sounded to her like she was having an episode. Cathy shoved her phone into her pocket and grabbed her medical bag. A quick check showed it was well stocked, but Mariel’s admonishment to be prepared to do a lot of stitching prompted her to grab a second surgical kit. Cathy called out to Mark and James, her volunteer assistants, as she ran for her truck.

“Mariel called! She says there was an accident and Jughead needs immediate attention! I may be a while!”

“Jughead?” Mark said. “I hope he’s all right!”

“I’ll let you know!” Cathy threw her medical bag onto the seat of her old double cab and cranked the key. The old truck was a bit reluctant, but it started and Cathy sped from the gravel drive, casting a cloud of dust in the truck’s wake. “Oh, Jughead, what did you get into?” she groaned as she turned onto the old logging road that would guide her to the cabin seven miles away.

Mariel laid her phone on the nightstand, then she pulled another sheet from the trunk and laid it over the wounded man. Now what? It would take Cathy half an hour to arrive, as the old logging roads were rough. The generator. Cathy would need hot water and electricity. Mariel went to the propane-powered generator at the back of the cabin and turned it on with the key. The generator, being a fairly new addition to the cabin, purred to life. The quick recovery water heater would have plenty of hot water. The reservoir of the water heater was always full, as the well pump ran on a solar-powered battery. Mariel went back inside and sat next to the bed to wait for Cathy, and she took the time to study the man’s face.

“You’re kind of pretty for a guy,” she mused, looking over the fine, straight nose and the smooth skin. That’s when she noticed the peculiar absence of any indication of male facial hair. Having spent three years as a member of a Marine battalion, she had witnessed every stage of male whisker growth. The absence of any was surprising. There was even no shadowing of a recent shave. She tentatively touched his exposed cheek with her finger and slid it down to his chin. Nothing. She looked at his bare arm. Again, there was no body hair. “Strange,” she whispered.

Also strange was the feeling of calm and well-being that had begun to creep over her after touching him, and she noticed a wholesome scent about him.

Jughead, having lain on the rug beside the bed to wait with his human, raised his head when he heard the familiar rumbling of Cathy’s truck on the old logging road and ran out of the cabin to greet her.

Cathy turned the truck onto the track that led to Mariel’s cabin, her hands gripping the steering wheel hard. Her imagination had been running wild while she had driven over the rough road, and she had finally come to the conclusion Jughead might have had a run-in with one of the black bears that were plentiful in these woods. To her surprise and relief, the big retriever was waiting for her in the yard, performing his goofy greeting dance.

“Jughead?” Cathy called, sliding out of the truck with her medical bag. The big dog ran to her with his usual enthusiastic greeting. “You’re okay, huh? What’s going on, then?” Cathy could hear the generator running. Mariel usually only ran it for an hour or so at night to heat water for a shower and to charge her electronics. The rest of the time Mariel heated water on an old kitchen wood-burning stove or the small propane camp stove and used rechargeable camp lamps for light.

“Cathy!” Mariel was at the door. “Come quick!” Mariel dashed back inside and Cathy ran in after her.

“Mariel, what the hell?” Cathy puffed. Her heavy frame was not made for running. “Why are you all wet?”

“Cathy, brace yourself. There’s a very strange man in here and he has shrapnel wounds to his back and the back of his head, and that’s not all he has!”

“A strange man? Where did he come from and ... wait a minute! You called me to treat a man? Why me and not a doctor?” Cathy huffed with exasperation as she followed Mariel into the tiny bedroom, out of breath and put out, and stared down at the man covered with a sheet.

“Because of this. Cathy, really, brace yourself.” Mariel lifted the bloodstained sheet from the man’s back.

“So what’s the big— ” She saw the wings and nearly fainted. “My god, Mariel! My god! What— oh my god!” Cathy felt panic setting in, then she felt Jughead’s nose press into her hand to reassure her. The dog obviously was not afraid of this man —this creature— lying before her.

“He needs our help, Cathy.” Mariel was almost pleading, unaware at the moment she was becoming emotionally invested in this strange stranger.

“God, I see why you didn’t call for George!” Cathy looked down at the lacerated back and wings. “What happened to him? Why is he trussed? Did he attack you?”

“I don’t know what happened to him. He was in this condition when Jug and I fished him out of the lake. No, tying him up was just a precaution, but it’s probably not necessary. If he was a threat, Jughead would know it.”

“You found him in the lake?”

“Sort of.”

“Mariel!”

“I’ll tell you what happened later. The water is hot and there’s electricity. What do you need?”

“Get me a low table to set up on and the footstool to sit on. I’ll need a basin of warm soapy water. I have two surgical kits here, everything I’ll need for sterilization. If there’s shrapnel in those wounds I’ll need something to put it in when it’s removed. Maybe the type of shrapnel will give us an idea of what he got himself into. And I will feel safer if you keep him tied down!”

While Cathy went into the bathroom to scrub her hands, Mariel rushed out of the room to fetch her low coffee table and the footstool, then she brought a metal bowl from the cupboards and filled it with warm water, adding some organic soap. She brought a smaller bowl for the shrapnel. While Cathy laid out her surgical kit, disinfectant, and antibiotics, Mariel took Jughead out of the room and closed the door. The Chesapeake was underfoot and insisted on being near the patient. Mariel pulled her chair close while Cathy examined the wounds, in case she needed to lend a hand.

“How’s the PTSD?” Cathy asked. She pulled on a pair of surgical gloves and began to clean the wounds, being careful to avoid touching the ridges in which the wings were anchored. She wasn’t ready to accept those wings, yet. “You seem to be handling this okay.”

“I was a wreck. Thank God for Jug.”

“I can imagine.” Cathy leaned closer to the prone body. “You see this?”

“What?” Mariel leaned close to get a better look.

“You are right, there is some sort of shrapnel in these wounds, but look what’s happening!”

“I see some of the shrapnel! I couldn’t before!”

“That’s because somehow, this guy’s muscles are extruding whatever had been embedded. This is incredible! I just watched this rise from the laceration!” Cathy picked up a fragment from the surface of one of the lacerations with her tweezers and dropped it into the bowl. “This looks like black glass.”

“There’s another there.” Mariel’s finger hovered over another fragment that had surfaced.

“Mariel, this is creeping me out! Who or what is this guy?”

“An alien? An angel? I don’t know, Cathy, but did you notice he has no facial or body hair? Maybe he’s an Elf. He reminds me of the Elves in the movies.”

“I don’t believe we are witnessing this and having this conversation!” Cathy tweezed out every fragment that appeared from the wounds on the lacerated back and wings. When no more appeared she probed the wounds to be sure all of the fragments had been removed, then she swabbed the wounds before opening a sterilized suture. She was about to insert the needle to begin the stitching but drew her hand back.

“What’s wrong?” Mariel asked.

“The wounds are closing on their own.” Both women watched in fascination as the wounds on the man’s back drew closed, stemming the bleeding.

“Check his head,” Mariel said. “He was bleeding there.”

“He isn’t now,” Cathy said after probing through the long black hair. “His wings, or arms, or whatever those are, have begun to heal.” Cathy looked closely at the appendages. “Are they glowing blue, or am I hallucinating?”

“They’re glowing! Maybe that has something to do with the healing process.”

“You’re pretty calm about all this!” Cathy said.

“So are you, considering. Do you feel it, too?”

“Feel what?”

“The calm. The peace. The feeling of well-being. I don’t know how to describe it. And did you notice his scent?”

“Yes, I do feel something like that. I think Jughead must have sensed it, or he would have been aggressive toward this guy. It’s not like a Chesapeake to be so readily accepting as he’s been.” Cathy leaned down to look at the face. “Yeah, he does have a nice smell, doesn’t he? It’s kind of like herbs. Maybe that scent is what has Jughead so calm and accepting.” Cathy’s gaze lingered on the man’s face. “He’s kind of pretty, isn’t he? Maybe he is an Elf. Mariel, how did you get him in here and on the bed all by yourself?”

“It wasn’t hard, Cathy. He weighs far less than his size indicates. I don’t think he weighs any more than I do. It’s so strange.”

“Wait, no it isn’t!” Cathy said. “Mariel, he is winged. He may have avian physiology!”

“Hollow bones?”

“Something like that. It would explain his low weight. This is amazing! I would love to study his physiology! What a biological discovery!”

“Cathy, you can’t tell anyone he’s here. We can’t risk anyone learning about him.”

“Why? Can you imagine what advances could be made in medicine if he can reveal how he heals himself like this, and where did he come from? There must be more like him!” Cathy could imagine the possible benefits of learning more about the stranger’s physiology.

“Cathy, you ever hear of Area 51?”

“Roswell? Mariel, you’ve got to be kidding! That stuff is all made-up sci-fi crap! You’re talking aliens and UFOs!”

“No, it isn’t made up.”

Cathy stared at her friend, dumbfounded. Mariel was a Marine veteran. She had connections in the military. She knew things ordinary citizens didn’t.

“Cathy, if word gets out about this alien being here, this entire region will be crawling with feds and brass you would wish you’d never met.”

“Alien!”

“For lack of a better description.”

“I could think of a better description.” Cathy stared at the lovely face of the stranger, taking a deep breath to inhale his scent. “I wonder what color his eyes are.”

“Cathy, you’re succumbing to whatever aura he exudes,” Mariel cautioned, watching the wistful expression form on her friend’s face. “I’ve been resisting it as much as I can, but I feel attracted to him. We really need to be cautious around him. I need to ask you for another favor. I only have enough food here for me and Jughead, and my supply for me is getting low. I was going to Mill Town tomorrow to re-supply, but now I can’t go, leaving him here alone, and I need to double my usual purchase to be able to feed him for as long as he is here.”

“Give me your debit card and make me a list. I’ll stop at Wild Haven and let Mark and James know I need to go into town for supplies. We’ve had no new wild animals come in for a couple of weeks and we have no animals in the kennels. They can handle the sanctuary until they have to leave.”

“Thanks, Cathy. Use the card to gas up your truck.” Mariel stood and opened the bedroom door. Jughead dashed inside and greeted both women as though he hadn’t seen them for days, then he piled onto the bed and lay beside the unusual occupant, laying his head on a bare shoulder. “I guess if Jug is so taken with him I can untie him.”

Mill Town was thirty miles away, so Mariel expected Cathy would not be back until evening. When Cathy had gone, she rummaged through the cupboards and storage boxes until she found a plastic squeeze bottle, which she washed and filled with well water. Mariel took the bottle to the bedroom and knelt by the bed. She noticed the man’s skin color had improved, but he lay still and unresponsive. She pressed the nozzle of the bottle between his lips and squeezed a little water into his mouth. She was relieved to see the lips move to accept the water, and his throat constricted as he swallowed.

“Drink it all,” Mariel encouraged, squeezing the bottle at intervals. “There’s plenty more.” Mariel stared at his face. “I wonder what color those eyes are.”

“Éanna,” the man murmured without opening his eyes. “An mbeidh tú ag damhsa domsa?” *Will you dance with me?*

“Ena?” Mariel asked. “Someone’s name? What language are you speaking? It’s not Arabic, Kurdish, or Farsi.” While in Iraq, Mariel had learned the rudiments of the languages common to the region, but languages were not her strong suit. “It doesn’t sound German or Russian, certainly not Asian.” Mariel fed him another bottle of water and looked over his wounds. They were fully closed and scarred over, and those extraordinary wings were no longer glowing. Then she went to the main room of the cabin and picked up her laptop. She had several language interpretation programs loaded onto it and onto both of her tablets. They had been handy when she was overseas. She hoped the satellite Internet connection was working today.

Jughead nudged her arm. Mariel looked up from her laptop and realized the sun was slanting in through the western window. "Sorry!" Mariel said, setting the laptop aside. She glanced at the time shown at the bottom right of the screen. "You've been inside nearly three hours, poor Jug! Let's go out." Mariel took a few moments to look in on her guest. He had shifted his position, now lying on his side with his knees drawn forward to his torso, his wings spread out behind him. He lay still and his breathing was steady. "Come."

Jughead bolted to the door and Mariel let him out. He ran toward the back of the cabin and into the undergrowth where he usually did his business. Mariel walked to the water's edge and stretched, drawing deep breaths of the clean, warm air. Then she saw the canoe crossing the small lake and she groaned.

"Wild Bill," she muttered. Her only neighbor, an eccentric hermit named William Carson, lived in an old camp on the opposite side of the lake. The few locals of the region called him Wild Bill because of his strange and far-fetched theories concerning world events and famous people. He was convinced the current world leaders were part of a cabal intent on depopulating the planet and replacing humanity with advanced human/alien hybrids. Wild Bill was the last person who should learn of her unexpected guest. Bill paddled his canoe to the beach and stepped out, his little Bluetick hound following.

"Hey, Mallie Marine!" Bill called out his pet name for her as he advanced toward Mariel. "How ya doing?" Bill shoved his hands into the back pockets of his old, stained Carhartt pants. His ever-present pack of cigarettes bulged in the breast pocket of his Wal-Mart flannel shirt. The little female hound at once put her nose to the ground to seek out any unfamiliar scent. Mariel watched her, worried she would find one.

"I'm good, Bill. What brings you across the pond?"

"I seen that squall that come up this side and wondered about it. Thought I saw you haul something out of the water afterward." Bill tried to act as though this was a casual observance, but he was a very poor actor. He stared at Mariel.

"I pulled my paddle board out of the water." Mariel pointed to the board, trying to think of another explanation for what Wild Bill might have seen. "My jacket and life jacket were on the shore and got pulled into the water. Yeah, it was quite a squall. Thank God it was over quick."

"Your jacket and life jacket, huh?"

"That's all." Mariel watched the little hound sniff along the shore, then become suddenly animated at the place where she had pulled the winged man ashore. Bill was watching, too.

"Wonder what she smells." Bill turned a suspicious look to Mariel. The hound began following the scent toward the cabin but was interrupted when Jughead charged from behind the cabin and bowled her over, sending her rolling and yelping and running to the safety of Wild Bill's canoe. Jughead charged between Mariel and Bill and took a protective stance facing the eccentric hermit. "He sure ain't friendly!" Bill said, taking a cautious step backward.

"Chesapeake don't take to strangers, Bill," Mariel said. "I've warned you about that before." And that was the reason no stranger could have come to her cabin, whether from land, sky, or water. Bill was well aware that Jug wasn't a welcoming dog. "The only people he likes besides me are Cathy and a couple of friends."

"That crazy vet. Why'd she come?"

"Bill, who I have for company and why is no concern to you. We don't bother you and I would appreciate it if you reciprocate that effort."

"I guess we ain't welcome, Tessie," Bill huffed at his little Bluetick. "We better get to our side of the pond."

“Take care, Bill.” Mariel’s hands were beginning to shake as she watched Wild Bill push off from the beach. “You saved me again, Jug,” she said to her dog. Jughead sat beside her and nudged her hand. “Hungry? So am I. Let’s go get something to eat.”

Later in the day, while Jughead watched over their guest, Mariel donned her clothing treated with permethrin, rubbed some Vick’s on her bare skin as an additional insect repellent, and picked up her fishing pole and tackle box. She had turned off the generator earlier in the afternoon, as there seemed to be no need for it. She carried her fishing gear to her canoe and paddled out to the deeper water to fish. Picking out her lure was easy. Her grandfather had always sworn by the Mooseleuk, a red and white spoon with a treble hook named after the lake and stream over by The Oxbow. Mariel preferred an eight-pound test line with a sturdy swivel, which gave the lure a lot of action as it moved through the water. She attached the Mooseleuk to the swivel on the line of her grandfather’s old Shakespeare rod. She had used that rod for years. The only alteration she had made to it was the L.L. Bean open-face reel she had bought two years ago.

Mariel loved fishing. Some of her best memories were of sitting in Gramp’s Old Town canoe with him as they cast their rods and talked. Gramp had been a Marine in the Vietnam War and had seen action. A lot of action and a lot of misery. He rarely spoke of it to anyone, but he had told her of the skirmishes and horrors he had experienced. Mariel had felt privileged and special to be the one he confided in, and it was those times with Gramp that had inspired her to join the Marines. In Gramp’s day, there were no female combat Marines. Had he lived long enough to see it, he would have been proud that his granddaughter had become one of the few who had qualified to see action. And he would have listened to her talk of the skirmishes and horrors of serving in Iraq.

Mariel looked into the bedroom. Jughead raised his head and looked at her over the sleeping stranger. Mariel used the squeeze bottle to get more water into that attractive mouth and wondered why the man hadn’t wakened with an urgent need to relieve himself. There was no indication he had urinated himself or soiled his pants.

“We have some nice bass fillets for supper,” she whispered to Jughead. “No stealing them! Cathy should be here soon.” Jughead flopped his tail on the bed at the mention of the vet’s name.

It was close to four when Cathy finally arrived. She climbed out of the truck, followed by her yellow Lab Binny. Mariel helped her unload and carry in the bags of groceries and supplies.

“Were you able to get the propane?”

“It’s in the back of the truck. I bought another cooler at Hansen’s Outpost. I think you’re going to need it. I made sure the battery is charged.”

“Was there enough in the account to cover it?” Mariel made a mental note to transfer more funds to that account. It had to be running low.

“Your card didn’t bounce. How is our patient?”

“He was still out twenty minutes ago, but he appears to just be sleeping, not unconscious. He’s rolled onto his side and taken a fetal position. The camp nurse is keeping an eye on him.”

“The camp nurse?”

“Jug. He’s hardly left the bed except to do his business, eat a bowl of kibble, and chase Wild Bill off the property.”

“Wild Bill? What the hell did he want, the nosy old bastard?”

“He saw what happened over here.”

“Oh. You never did tell me how that guy arrived here.”

“I’ll tell you over bass fillets and beer.”

Mariel and Cathy brought in all of the supplies and food, then Cathy insisted on looking in on her 'patient'. Binny, looking for Jughead, followed the women into the bedroom.

"You're right, he's just sleeping now," Cathy whispered. "He looks so much better!"

"I'd like to see how well those wounds have healed, but I don't think he should be disturbed."

"Jughead's really settled in, hasn't he?" Cathy leaned over the sleeper and scratched Jughead's ear. The man stirred slightly and she held her breath, but he didn't wake. "Wow, sound sleeper. I wonder if that deep sleep is part of his healing process. Binny, no." Binny had approached the bed and stared at its occupant, her tail low and wagging, then she laid her head on the edge of the bed and whined.

"Just like Jug," Mariel whispered. "There's something about him."

The women retreated to the main room of the cabin and put away the food and supplies. Cathy turned on the second cooler and tested the battery again. It was fully charged and began the cooling process as soon as the switch was on. She punched the temperature setting on the digital panel and closed the lid. Mariel had taken the beer and water jugs from the other cooler so the perishable groceries could go in. The beverages would go into the new cooler when it had reached the needed temperature. Warm beer was preferable to spoiled milk and hamburger.

Mariel had lit the coals on the grill earlier and they were ready for cooking. She put the bass fillets on the grill while Cathy made a salad. Later, she and Cathy sat on the porch of the cabin with their grilled fish, salad, and beer and watched the sun sink behind the low mountains. Binny joined them, but Jughead still stayed with the mysterious sleeper in the bedroom. Mariel related to Cathy what had happened that morning when the cyclone had deposited a winged man into the lake.

"And Wild Bill saw it?"

"He saw something of it. He's suspicious."

"He's a crackpot."

"I know he's eccentric and paranoid."

"He's more than that," Cathy said. "He generally doesn't allow people at his place, but he called me over a couple of years ago when Tessie got in a tussle with a fisher. She was torn up and his Land Rover was out of gas. He made me tend to her outside, but I got some glimpses into his camp. Mariel, he's got a bank of electronics in that shack: computers and communication equipment and God knows what else. Tom Johnson, the game warden, told me Bill is into alien hunting and believes he's seen UFOs around here over the years he's been here." Cathy paused, remembering why she was at the cabin. "Well, maybe he's seen something here a time or two."

"He saw something this morning. Cathy, how does he power all those electronics?"

"Believe it or not, there is a single power line running from Porter Hill Road to his camp."

"What?" Mariel felt her heart rate jump.

"No one knows how he could afford to have the line run and to maintain it. Maybe he has a rich uncle."

"He does, Cathy! He has a rich Uncle Sam!"

"What do you mean?"

"Cathy, he's a fed!"

"Wild Bill? Noooo... Why would a fed be way up here in the middle of nowhere?"

"Remember I mentioned Area 51?"

"That's way down in New Mexico."

"Nevada," Mariel corrected. "That's just one of their sites."

"What do you mean?"

“Cathy, there is a branch of the Pentagon that explores the existence of paranormal activity and the possibilities of harnessing and using it in covert warfare. They investigate every report of UFO sightings and paranormal events, and they establish outposts in areas where there seem to be multiple events. There’s usually only one agent assigned to the outpost so the locals won’t grow suspicious. The agent integrates into the local community and is usually seen as a harmless, unsociable eccentric. These agents are very good at hiding their identity and what they do.”

“Mariel, really? That sounds far-fetched.”

“Not if you know the right people. One of the independent contractors we escorted a few times in Iraq had connections with the Pentagon, and he talked a lot when he was drunk. He apparently talked too much. His Humvee was hit by a Javelin missile while he was traveling between sites. It never made the news but was officially logged as mistaken friendly fire. Something like that usually happens when people who know too much talk too much.”

“Mariel, I sometimes forget what you went through over there. That contractor spoke specifically about the Pentagon investigating paranormal stuff?”

“Yes.”

“Mariel, if what you just said is true, doesn’t that mean Bill is here because there is a history of paranormal activity here? Here?” Cathy felt the hairs stand up on her arms.

“I suppose it does. Gramp told me this cabin sits on land that was considered by the Wabenaki tribes who used to camp around this lake to be a spiritual place. They called it Cross Point because they believed this was a place where spirits crossed from this world to the afterlife, and where ancestral spirits sometimes crossed the boundary of the afterlife to return. He said his great-grandfather, a Penobscot Elder, had witnessed spirits crossing here. Gramp said he did, too. He bought this land from the paper company to protect it from development, and his will stated whoever inherited it must maintain it as it is and continue to protect it from development. Cathy, when did Wild Bill arrive here? I don’t remember anyone inhabiting that camp when I used to come here with Gramp.”

“He came about the same time I opened the sanctuary. Seven years ago.”

“When Gramp died. Gramp left the cabin to me because his only surviving son, Uncle Ross, wanted to build commercial fishing and hunting camps here. I had a legal fight with him in claiming this place.”

“And it stood empty until you came three years ago.”

“Something had to have happened to bring a fed here to watch an empty cabin.”

“Maybe Bill’s being here has nothing to do with the feds or reports of paranormal activity, Mariel. No one around here seems to be concerned about UFOs or pookas or Native American spirits. To be honest, until you arrived, this was a pretty dull place to live, except for poachers and stupid hunters. Maybe Bill really is just a nonsociable eccentric who thinks he’s tracking UFOs.”

“And the power line to his camp?”

“Maybe he really does have a rich relative who pays for all of his electronic toys to keep him happy and out of the way, so he doesn’t embarrass the family by showing up at some swanky shindig in his Carharts and shouting his conspiracy theories.” The thought that Wild Bill might be a Pentagon fed was too frightening for Cathy to accept.

“Well, maybe.” That would be the safest explanation for Wild Bill’s presence, but Mariel had doubts.

“Is all that stuff about Roswell and paranormal activity really true?”

“It’s true.” Mariel patted Binny’s head when the dog pushed her elbow with her nose. She and Cathy sipped their beer in silence for a while, listening to the loons on the lake call *ooo-loo* to

each other, with their signature warbling chuckle following the crooning “It’s getting late,” Mariel finally said. “Maybe you should stay the night rather than try to drive out of here in the dark. You can have the roll-away and I will take the sofa.”

“Gladly. I’m thinking you probably shouldn’t be alone with our alien tonight, anyway.”

Mariel and Cathy looked in on the patient before turning in. Mariel squeezed more water into his mouth to prevent him from dehydrating. She and Cathy stared at the smooth face for some minutes, then Mariel touched Cathy’s arm to draw her attention.

“He sure is pretty for a guy,” Cathy said. “He doesn’t look like a spirit, and I’m pretty sure spirits don’t bleed. But where the hell did he come from?”