Southwestern Songline
A Trilogy

Book 1: The Fall
A Novel:
By Denver C. Davis
Teller stopped, and looked down at the prints his boots had left in the parched red dirt of this desolate country.

Skirting the gnarled sage and creosote they grew smaller, step-by-step until they vanished. No more now than a dusty trail to his past.

Squinting, he looked to their point of origin.

In the distance, a small dot of color shimmered through the waves of rising heat, floating like a mirage, blue against a pallet of earth tones, ephemeral in context.

A smile touched his lips and his eyes tightened beneath the shade of his worn hat. In this vast emptiness that blue dot would be the only proof of his passing. The footprints would vanish with the wind.
Turning from the flickering blue that was his beloved Dodge truck, Teller looked across the convoluted landscape at massive rock spire that rose two hundred feet into a cloudless blue sky. Like a giant stone finger it beckoned him into this grand panorama. “Come,” it silently teased.

Teller accepted the invitation, for beyond that stone tower lie his destination. A mineral hot spring high on the banks of the Colorado River, its healing waters percolating up into a nearly perfect sandstone bowl. Closing his eyes he pictured himself already soaking blissfully in its waters.

‘A fitting place to wash away my sins,’ he muttered, and took the first step of many to come.

‘Loose but not lost’ was his maxim, and he never regretted a single moment spent loose in this matchless landscape uninhibited by times constraints, and people’s expectations.

The better part of Teller’s life had been spent chasing dreams, and this Daliesque’ landscape was the perfect backdrop to continue the hunt.

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Teller first saw the lights of Durango through the snow blowing sideways past his windshield.

He had left Steamboat Springs early that morning and the weather had been spectacular. But halfway down Molas Pass the snow had started to fall, and by the time he hit Hermosa it was coming so fast and thick he could barely see the pavement through the little swath his worn wipers cleared. Cursing the weather and wiping at the fog on the inside of the windshield as he drove, he peered through the snow reflected in his headlights, searching for some type of shelter.

There was a momentary lull in the storm, and he saw a large structure to his right. At first it was no more than a deeper shadow in the darkness, but ever hopeful he pulled over and rolled down the window. It was an old barn.
Putting the truck in four-wheel drive he plowed through the snow.

But when his headlights lit the barn, he threw it in park, squeezed the steering wheel and groaned, “Shit . . .”

Wind sculpted snow drifts had piled halfway up the two wooden doors, erasing any thoughts of easy entry. Teller stared at the wall of snow for a moment longer, gave a sigh, and stepped from the warmth of the cab into the storm.

Mercifully the barn blocked most of the wind, but with the snow piling up fast he needed to get to work. Pulling his coat tight, he reached under the tarp that was stretched across the trucks bed and extracted a shovel. Everything he owned was under that tarp, and while everything he owned didn’t amount to much, tonight he was very glad to count it among his few possessions.

Pulling on a pair of gloves he began digging, and the snow filled the holes nearly as fast as he made them. But he persevered, and when he finally pulled the doors open he was rewarded with a barn that was not only empty, it was reasonably weather tight. Thanking the stars for his luck Teller shook the snow from his shoulders, flicked the headlights to bright, and drove in. It might still be cold, but it was dry.

Following a quick investigation he found a stack of hay bales in the loft, and breaking one open he laid his sleeping bag on the cushioning straw. “Outstanding.” he grinned.

But before calling it a night Teller went to the doors and opened them just enough to stick out his head out into the storm. “Fuck you snow.” he laughed, and as the wind blew the words away, he shut the doors tight.

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The following morning Teller was able to push one of the doors open just far enough to squeeze out, and was happy to see that the storm had passed. The day was dawning clear and bright, so with a smile on his face and his trusty shovel in hand,
he cleared the ground enough to swing the doors open, and hopping into the truck, he drove to town to get breakfast.

Teller had parked near the river, and was whistling merrily as he strolled down Main Street examining the menus posted on the windows of the cafés, and checking out the girls all bundled up in their winter clothes. But halfway down the second block he saw a wooden sign hanging above the entry door with the name “Farquahrts” carved in fancy script.

Intrigued, he walked in.

The place was empty but for two people, and as the door closed behind him they both looked up. One was a local who held court from the same stool every night, and the other was the owner. Teller smiled, ordered a beer, and within minutes he had the proprietor and its star patron laughing.

By the time noon rolled around he had met several of the owner’s friends, by midnight he was part of the inner circle, and by the time the bar closed he was offered a job with a local contractor. So, under the starry skies of Durango, Teller, now well fed and employed, but still homeless, drove back to the barn.

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Teller awoke to bright beams of sunlight streaming through the cracks of the barn’s wooden walls, lighting his breath as it clouded in the cold air. Exhaling a big frosty puff, he crawled out of his sleeping bag, anxious to start the day.

The results of the previous night were both surprising and unexpected. But as fortunate as they were, he now had a new problem. Housing. And as he packed his gear into the truck he looked around the barn and smiled.

It was time to find more suitable accommodations.

An hour later, with a full tank of gas and a steaming cup of coffee between his legs, Teller hung his arm out the window and headed south on highway 550. It was a beautiful day for a drive, but homes on the mesa were few, and empty ones fewer.
So by the time he hit the New Mexico border he had given up on house hunting.

So, in the tiny town of Aztec he bought a six-pack and began working his way back to Durango by way of obscure backcountry roads.

As he was cruising along and singing with the radio, he caught a glimpse of what looked to be an empty farmhouse semi hidden by dying apple trees and a sagging barn. It looked a little run down, but to Tellers eyes it looked like home.

Buoyed with hope, he turned up the driveway, rubbed the dust away from one of the windows and peered in.

He liked what he saw. It was well built, and although it was in need of repair he considered that a minor problem, and with winter fast approaching it was one that could be more easily addressed once he was safe within its sheltering walls. The trick now was locating the abandoned home’s owner . . .

Teller suffered another cold night in the barn, and the next day he was back on the Mesa knocking on the door of every place within a five-mile radius while dodging snarling dogs and placating suspicious ranchers.

Sadly, by evening he had no more than a ripped sleeve on one of his beloved Pendleton’s to show for his efforts.

But the next afternoon his luck took a turn for the better, for when Teller stepped through the gate of a white picket fence at the end of a tree-lined drive and knocked on a screen door, a cherubic farmwife answered. She was wary at first, but once she found that he wasn’t selling vacuum cleaners or Encyclopedias, she invited him in for coffee, and by the time he stirred the sugar into his second cup she had given him the abandoned homeowners name, address, and the latest on Mary’s daughter who lived just down the road.

The happy woman rattled on, pleased to have the company, but Teller, now in possession of the information he needed was anxious to be on his way. Thanking the woman for her hospitality he stood to go. But the talkative housefrau would not hear of it. She bustled about, insisting he have a piece of
homemade pie and telling him that she would be happy to give the owner of the place a call.

True to her word, two pieces of pie and an hour later she introduced him to Clarence, a taciturn old fellow who was now well into his eighties.

At first Clarence was reluctant, but as he watched Teller shovel coal into its bin for the coming winter he reconsidered, and with the farmwife’s good word as endorsement they struck a deal. Teller could rent the house and fix it as he pleased.

With a smile and a handshake Teller became a member of the community.

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Durango suited his personality perfectly.

The town was eccentric, small, hip, and remote. And although work was scarce he didn’t care. Work was work. All of his precious time was spent traversing the wind-and-water sculpted emptiness that lay to the west.

And while he wandered far more than he worked, his time spent in this wild corner of Southeastern Utah instilled in him a deep and powerful spiritual affinity for this lonely country.

Gazing across this vast panorama Teller saw extraordinary beauty. But he also knew this to be a land of ever-present danger, harboring deadly secrets beneath its rugged face. And in this, he felt the land to be the equivalent of the human soul. Fractured, mysterious, and treacherous.

But still, he reveled in those secrets.

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A tiny figure against a monumental backdrop, Teller held out his arms and turned full circle, exulting in his isolation. But for the breeze whispering in the sage, the silence was complete, the beauty unparalleled.

Looking to the mantle of snow covering the peaks of the La Sal Mountains to the east he marveled at the paradoxical deception of this land. For while to the novice this may seem a
bleak desert, in reality it was the catchment for the whole of the west.

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Between four distinct sets of snow capped peaks in four different states lay an area the size of West Virginia. And from the snow piled deep on those Mountains the water flowed.

Beginning with that first drop of melting snow, it gathered into tiny rivulets that formed a thousand small brooks. These merged to become creeks, tumbling down Evergreen slopes and pouring through Piñon dotted mesas; carving the earth deeper and wider as they went, and all joining forces to form four of the most beautiful rivers in the West. The Green, The San Juan, The Animas, and The Delores, each working tirelessly to create a land of fairy-tale canyons, red sandstone towers, delicate arches and multi-hued cliffs, and all eventually merging with the mighty Colorado; the final result being the magnificent Grand Canyon.

And he stood in the great basin where every raindrop made that river a reality.

Tugging again at his hat Teller stepped towards that upraised stone finger, cursing his restless soul and the speed of the passing years.

That he had not been kind to his body was a colossal understatement, and that he now suffered the consequences was certainly no surprise; for Teller was not a man who observed life, he absorbed it. He fought, drank and danced with it. He was a man of great appetite, and having partaken fully the banquet was now paying dearly for his hunger.

Thinking back to a song he had written for his Grandfather before he had died, Teller sang a prophetically appropriate line:

“To sacrifice youth and replace it with truth seems an unfairly high price to pay.”

Mercifully, the physical limitations were minimal, and the memories of pleasures past far outweighed the physical pains
of today. Thus, for Teller, each hurt was simply an ever-present inconvenience, another reminder of good times had, and ultimately, an acceptable trade for choices made.

Normally, Teller took great joy in his solitude. But today something was different . . . obscure, yet so imminent the air itself seemed to tingle with expectation. He paused, and sent out mental fingers; searching for the source of this ambiguous sensation.

But with nothing more concrete than an uneasy feeling, he attributed his discomfort to the static electricity created by the bank of ominous storm clouds that were building against the La Sal Mountains to the east. They were growing into dark threatening towers so quickly it was as if he were seeing them in time-lapse film, and being aware of how quickly the weather could change in this country he quickened his pace, and trotting for the last quarter mile, he came to the edge of the massive slash that time had carved into the earth.

Dropping his pack, he kneeled and over the lip at the rumbling river two hundred feet below.

Suddenly everything went dark.

A cloud of dust blanketed the Sun, and a wall of wind slammed into him with such startling force it nearly sent him over the edge. Falling back, he brought his arm up to shield his face from the air-borne grit.

And as he peeked over the wool of of his sleeve, a bolt of lightening struck the far side of the canyon and its searing white light blinded him while the deafening clap of thunder that followed rattled his very bones. In seconds he was pelted by wind driven rain as the temperature plummeted.

He knew he must make a decision.

Blinking against burned retinas and drenched by the cold horizontal rain, Teller began fumbling though his gear, forcing his numb fingers through familiar motions, relying on muscle memory more than sight.
Besieged by the onslaught of rain and darkness, Teller tucked his shoulder against the sharp wind, and cursing the water puddling around his knees removed a piton from his pack and hammered it into a fracture line in the wall.

Turning a defiant face towards the violent sky he roared into the wind, “Did I do something to piss you off?”

A burst of lightning answered, and his smile flashed white in the darkness. “I’ll take that as a yes,” he laughed, and slipping the rope through the carabiner he gave it a final tug, and delivered himself into fate’s slippery fingers.

As he dropped out of the winds sharp sting, the rain tapered off, and grey fog joined the water that poured over the stone lip of the canyon. But now captured in an eternity of grey, wet blindness, he lowered himself cautiously down the wall, hand below hand, one arm-length at a time, delicately working the rope. The fog was so thick that at times Teller could not see the wall his feet pressed against, but every so often the wind would blow holes in the mist, and through those wispy spaces he caught glimpses of the river below.

It was still a long way down.

Pressing his feet against the rock, he leaned and walked backwards, the rope passing slowly through his hands.

He had just found a rhythm of push, release, and drop, when the cliff wall suddenly receded and he swung blindly into its cutout. His heart jumped, and thrusting his feet forward to soften the anticipated impact, he simply swung through air until he reached the end of his line, and began a pendulum swing back. Eventually his momentum died and he was left hanging from the nylon line like a tiny spider, slowly spinning while the tempest howled above.

Shivering and soaked, but relieved to be out of the brunt of the squall Teller wrapped his fist around the cold wet line just as another clap of thunder snapped the sky. The resulting crash seemed to reverberate through the earth’s core and the entire cliff wall trembled and shook.
The percussive rumble rolled down the canyon, and he relaxed, letting go of the rope. Leaning back into the harness, he cupped his hands and blew his warm breath into them.

Rubbing briskly the friction warmed the wrinkled extremities. He turned his face towards the sky, closed his eyes, and let the mist soak his smiling face. He had made it.

With his hands now warm Teller once again wrapped them around the line and lowered himself until his feet touched the wall. Comforted by the feel of his feet against solid rock he pushed, stretching back into the harness, but as he pushed he felt a tiny slip in the rope and a millisecond later the line went slack. His fist tightened, gripping only flaccid line.

He dropped.

Teller reflexively shoved away from the rock face with his feet, and in that first split-second he wondered why the self-belay failed. His second, and more poignant thought was that it was a long way down.

Unwrapping his hands from the rope as his fall gained velocity his thoughts were not of his impending death, but rather the sensual caress of the rushing wind; and as he tumbled backwards, his eyes went to the beauty of the last trace of sunlight glinting off the snow that still blanketed the distant mountains.

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Teller slammed onto a rock shelf twenty feet below the point where his rope had given way. The impact was crushing but he felt no pain. Instead, the moment his body made contact with the stone shelf his perspective suddenly shifted, and he found himself floating above and watching his flailing form continue it’s tumbling descent towards the river below. The tiny figure splashed, and slowly sunk into a pool of emerald water.

Again, his perspective changed.
Now calm, warm, and sensing no more threat than if he were suspended in embryonic fluid, he opened his eyes.

Shafts of filtered sunlight pierced the green water, creating wavering columns of white that were wide at the surface, narrowing as they penetrated the depths.

One of the brighter beams caught Teller’s eye, and he followed its light down into the shadows of the dark water. Suddenly there was reflected flash, and in the murky depths he saw the silver scales of an enormous fish, a fish that was swimming towards him in slow, lazy circles. Up, up, up, this monster spiraled, growing ever closer, and Teller, paralyzed watched as this creature plowed through the water.

As it passed it gently bumped him with its nose and he was jostled sideways, his shirt catching on the sharp point of a translucent dorsal fin. Suddenly he was being towed along as the glistening beast continued its rise, moving in an ever-widening spiral as if following a corkscrew’s invisible path, and as they splashed through the turbulent waters and into blue skies, he took a great, gasping breath of sweet air as water poured down his face . . . coughing, he caught his breath and tried to twist free, but his limbs were immobilized.

Panic clawed at the survival portion of his brain and for a few terror filled seconds he struggled. But as his energy drained, the desire to fight evaporated with it.

Acceptance replaced panic, and soon he and this improbable beast were moving downriver as one, and lying back to back on this enormous fish, Teller’s eyes went to the sky where an astonishing spectacle was taking place.

A Sun that had been moving at its expected pace only moments ago began to speed up, and in mere seconds it was racing over the canyon, sliding from the rim of one sheer wall to the other.

Morning turned to midday, midday darkened to twilight, and twilight morphed into deep night all within the span of a few heartbeats. Next, the stars materialized, but once familiar
constellations began to twist and gather into strange and unrecognizable patterns, spinning around a central axis.

Then the axis blew apart.

All of the contained light suddenly exploded, and the splinters of dazzling brightness vanished, leaving a blackness so complete he felt as if it would swallow his soul.

But then, as suddenly as it began, these speeding sparkles of light were brought to a halt at the very edge of the sky, and as if great cosmic hands were scooping this scattered energy together, the tiny splinters became a globe.

Mesmerized, Teller watched as this brilliant sphere pulsated, growing ever larger until suddenly there was a burst of dazzling light, and a piece of the sphere broke loose from its center. The piece flared, and becoming a comet, aligned itself directly with him, falling as if it meant to crush him, and so intense was the oncoming light that he instinctively squeezed his eyes tightly shut, waiting for contact.

The moment passed.

Slowly, he opened one eye. To his left he saw a small cave set high on the riverbank, and in its depths an intense radiance pulsated, throbbing in perfect sequence with the beat of his heart, and although the light beating within the cave was curious, his attention was drawn to a petroglyph-covered arch that spanned the opening.

The symbols were many, and most Teller recognized, having seen their like in the course of his travels. But others seemed slightly different and he struggled to place them. Then he remembered; they were Mayan. He had seen similar drawings many years ago, carved and painted into the stones of the pyramids in Tulum and Palenque.

But as curious as the origin of these symbols may be, any perplexity regarding them was pushed aside as he caught sight of something that even in this inexplicable journey seemed out of place.

Dimly lit within the shadows of the cave stood a man.
He was dressed in a suit of Spanish armor, with leather leggings and surrounded by gold coins. Stranger still, he held a gourd festooned with colorful feathers in one hand, and a smooth staff in the other. Teller was stunned, and as the beat of his heart increased, the heartbeat of light within the cave slowed . . . Then the cave went dark.

Teller was given no time to puzzle the moment. The fish’s tail began to pump furiously side-to-side, and he was swept away, racing downriver as the canyon narrowed, forcing the water that was placid only moments ago to surge against the sheer walls and turn into a tumult of crashing rapids.

Looking between his feet and over the great dorsal fin of the fish, Teller’s eyes went wide; an enormous horseshoe lip waited, and the whole of the river plunged over its edge.

Given no choice he followed.

Cool moss tickled his back as he skimmed over the slippery rim, the river’s momentum sending him into space like a slingshot; and time slowed, and for a seeming eternity he and the fish floated, hanging suspended in mid-air. But as the arc crested the fish began to drop, and somersaulting through the air they began to separate. But a tattered remnant of Teller’s shirt still attached to the fish’s dorsal fin became an umbilical cord that caused him to rotate, and he spun until he was face-to-face with the fish; so close he could see his convex image reflected in the creature’s dark eyes.

Paralyzed, he stared at his reflected image in the fish’s bulbous eye; and as he watched the orb began to swell, his face expanded with it. He tried to push away but could not.

The cord held him tight.

Teller scrambled against the fish’s head as it continued to inflate, but his hands could find no purchase on the expanding slippery surface. It was as if the creature was slowly filling with pressurized air, becoming larger and larger. Finally it burst, and a shower of sparkling mist completely engulfed him.
And as the glittering mist dissolved, Teller sensed another presence. It was an aura of such overwhelming power that it could not be ignored.

He turned his head. There, on a flat rock shelf that protruded so far from the cliff’s edge that it seemed to float, sat a large Coyote. Their eyes met. And in the microsecond before Teller disappeared over the edge, the coyote smiled, and gave a wink with a brilliant yellow eye.

Once again Teller tumbled through the air; the roar of the water filling his ears while his eyes were assaulted with the prismatic beauty of a thousand scale-shaped water droplets.

These drops were all that remained of the fish and they surrounded him; each curved surface reflecting a perfect image of both his, and the coyote’s grinning face. And as they spilled through space he noticed that the drops fell at exactly same rate as his own slow-motion descent.

Cartwheeling through the droplets, all Teller could see were his duplicates twisting and bending like the reflections in a shattered funhouse mirror. But as the drops containing these tiny images began to drift away he reached out with both hands, fingers extended, desperately trying to pull himself back together again . . . . But the moment that his physical fingertip touched its reflected replica in one of the larger droplets, ebony daggers dug into his shoulders, and his fall came to a bone wrenching stop, and he snapped back into the sky so suddenly that one of his boots broke free and spun away, bouncing against the cliff wall and lost in shadows below.

Teller kicked and twisted, baffled and disorientated by this sequence of unreal events; and now, pulled from those by this unexpected intervention, was now faced with something new.

Reaching up, and slapping blindly at the source of the compression his fingers touched a solid, smooth surface and he twisted, craning his neck to get a glimpse of his savior.

What he saw was beyond belief.
His fingertips were touching the smooth talons of a giant Raven; torn between panic and exultation Teller’s powerful grip squeezed the rough legs of the bird as he was lifted wing-beat by wing-beat into an endless blue.

His ragged breathing slowed, and squinting teary eyes against the cutting wind, he took stock of his situation.

To the north the snow-covered peaks of the La Plata and the La Sal Mountains stabbed the blue with teeth of brilliant white, while below the red towers of Monument Valley seemed to reach up to clutch at his dangling feet.

And while Shiprock sailed along the southeast horizon, it was to the Southwest the Raven flew, and it was there the San Francisco Peaks waited.

Hanging helplessly, Teller bobbed as the bird’s massive wings beat the air. And with each rise and fall, his breathing began to synchronize with the pulsing feathered beat. When it matched the tempo of wings, his eyes fluttered closed.

The Raven cawed, and Teller’s eyes popped open.

The Mountains that seemed miles away only moments ago were now directly beneath him; and the Raven was making a slow, sweeping circle over the two snowy peaks.

As it passed over the higher of the two it folded its wings and dove. The snowfield raced towards him, but the bird made an arc, and at the bottom of that curve, it released its grip on his shoulders.

Twisting his body in preparation for the inevitable contact with the steep glistening cornice that rushed towards him Teller smashed into the crusted fortification, and bursting through in a cloud of white powder, he bounced down the slope, tumbling and rolling out of control until he was finally forced to a stop by the mass of snow he had plowed forward.

Lying face down in cold sharp crystals of ice, Teller opened his eyes . . . His cheek rested on a pile of snow only inches from a precipitous drop.
He lifted his head and glanced around . . .
No huge Raven. No grinning Coyote.
Teller pushed himself to his knees and stood, gazing over
the ledge at the vast panorama that lay before him.
It was an immense and beautifully rugged country; a land
that was spiritual and unforgiving, avoided and coveted, and
since the beginning of time home to four Native peoples.
The ancient Anasazi, the Hopi, the Zuni, and the Navajo.
All who referred to this area as: “The Navel of the Earth.”
Teller’s eyes slowly opened to light drizzle of cold wet mist falling lightly from the sky. He sputtered, and rolled over, putting his left hand down to push himself up.

It touched only empty space.

His sharp reflexes engaged immediately and he pulled back, rolling in the opposite direction and avoiding a very long drop in real life. Steadyng himself, he looked over the edge.

Two hundred feet below the narrow ledge where he had miraculously landed he could see and hear the river’s tumbling waters. With a slow exhale he rolled onto his back to stare at the darkening sky.

Stiff, sore, disorientated, and shivering with cold, he began checking for injuries. But apart from a jammed shoulder, bruising, and a missing shoe, he found nothing more serious than a gash on the back of his head. His hair was matted and warm with blood, but the flow seemed to have stopped.

‘How long have I been out?’

Lifting his hand into the bone-numbing wind, he crawled closer to the cliff in an attempt to find shelter. It was futile.

Giving up on finding a windbreak Teller propped himself against the wall and began to gently rub his head; not only to massage the area that was beginning to throb and swell, but also in the effort to establish some definition between the cold reality of where he now found himself, and the bizarre journey his mind had just taken him.

Turning his head and looking to the ledge again he contemplated his situation. He had been in better, but all things considered; this could have certainly turned out worse.

He laid his head back against the wet stone. But as he did so his eyes saw something protruding from beneath his battered pack. Crawling over to it, he smiled.
Luck upon luck, there lay his missing boot. Casting his eyes to the sky he mumbled, “Thank heaven for those small favors.” But then, looking over tiny shelf’s edge, and to the river far below, he amended the comment.

“Make that big favors . . ..”

The sky began to clear as if to say “you’re welcome.”

Teller picked up the pack, unfastened the one-man ‘pop up’ tent, and assessed the limited space of the rock shelf.

The area was just big enough for the tent, and its slight tilt helped to drain the surface of rain. Again he gave thanks and crawled closer to the wall.

The wall was a nearly vertical slab of stone, but it had a protruding fracture that formed a slight overhang. These were small things, but critical. So, despite the combined challenges of foul weather and agony, he managed to assemble the tent, slip inside and light a small gas stove for heat.

Once the tent had warmed a few degrees Teller extricated himself from the soggy clothing that plastered his shivering skin, toweled off, and draping a heat reflective blanket over his shoulders began a slower, and more thorough examination.

Each spot he pressed on his battered shoulder produced different levels of pain, and with each new hurt he heard the voice of his father: “It’s not the fall that hurts son, it’s that sudden stop at the end.”

Rotating his arm Teller groaned and mumbled, “No shit.”

Grateful that he had packed well he pulled a warm dry sweater over a dry t-shirt, and unrolling a slim foam pad, lay back to stare at the point where the tent poles met at the center of the thin fabric’s ceiling.

He gave silent thanks. “Damn I got lucky this time.”

Dry, and warming at last, he allowed his mind to wander back to the events that led him to this point.

In retrospect Teller supposed he’d always had more than his share of luck. But along with his luck came an equal propensity for trouble, trouble that was inevitably followed by some type of physical collateral damage.
It was a pattern, and upon examination the pattern was not difficult to see.

The mood leading to his discontent inevitably started with a nagging restlessness, some faint sense of wanting to be somewhere other than where he was. It was a trait he had inherited from his father. A genetic quirk, he supposed, like his left-handedness. But it was a much less complicated issue that ultimately presented the larger difficulty in his life.

Teller simply enjoyed being alone.

Unfortunately, people often, and wrongly, assumed his penchant for solitude was indifference. But that simply wasn’t the case. It had nothing to do with whether he did, or didn’t like people; it was that he felt no need to be constantly surrounded by them. He cherished solitude and crowds made him edgy. But as the population increased it migrated west and his solitude diminished.

Another life-long personal struggle was a deeply restless nature. It had first shown itself when he was a child, and had never lessened. Teller was bright, and he was clever; but he was easily bored. And while he possessed a nearly providential ability to absorb the information that interested him, he was intolerant with the mundane. He found repetition not only dull, but pointless. And as he grew older he realized that no matter the organization, institutions rolled slowly over your soul, crushing all imagination.

The larger issue however, had been conformity.

*That* had been the root of his latest dilemma, and it was this streak of independence that had set the course of Teller’s life at an early age, and was responsible for his lifelong distrust in convention and instilling a rock-solid commitment of never allowing others to dictate his future.

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On the morning of his eighteenth birthday Teller heard the call of the road. He answered, and the next day he packed all of his belongings into his old ‘66’ Chevrolet, pointed it west, and left Colorado for parts unknown.

For the rest of that magnificent summer Teller roamed the Rocky Mountains, working when necessary, and reveling when reveling was to be had. But sadly, all good things must end, and when the high country of Idaho got its first dusting of snow he knew it was time to find a place to winter. And it was with that first snowfall Teller’s primary weakness came into play. Planning . . . when he had left Colorado he had not thought any further than the State Line. Consequently he had no contingency plans, and with no destination in mind the direction he went was irrelevant.

So, with that now his new plan, he maintained his merry but rudderless course west.

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Making a stop in small town outside of Portland, Teller pulled into a little country store to refill his cooler. And while sipping a beer in the shade he perused the corkboard that served as the town’s advertising center.

Once again Teller’s luck came to the rescue. A photo tacked to the cork caught his eye. It was a picture of a rustic cabin for rent. He tore off the number and made a call.

To his great pleasure, the cabin was nestled deep in the trees above the Columbia River, and it was exactly the type of refuge he was seeking. So negotiating a rent-for-improvement agreement with the owner Teller now had a home. The owner got the better deal of course, and knew it, but Teller didn’t care. He was just happy to have a place to think about what to do next.

But time trudges on, and as Fall turned into the endless drizzle that defines the Northwest winter Teller found himself staring out of the window at a grey, colorless day, trying to ignore the subliminal knocking in his mind.
It had begun as a light tapping on his cerebral door several weeks earlier. It was subtle at first, but had grown louder with each passing day. He had ignored it in the hopes that it might just go away, but today it was a full-blown hammering.

The rain splashed against the glass. And just as the rain’s beating against the window matched the pounding on that door in his head, Teller reluctantly let it swing open. He was not surprised in the slightest when he found himself facing his old nemesis once again. Boredom. Looking up at the calendar, he counted the weeks till spring.

~

Time passed, and by the time his twenty-fifth birthday rolled around Teller had become what he laughingly referred to as a skilled hobo. He was proficient in the building trades, could fix or fabricate nearly anything, and was a passable musician to boot. But passable musicians were always hungry, and starving musicians were a dime a dozen.

So, his Gypsy feet, compounded with his aversion to hunger and closed spaces, left construction as the only job that not only paid well, but one he could always leave with no concerns about finding another down the road, and this nomadic lifestyle suited Teller perfectly; for it allowed him not only his freedom, but also the opportunity of living and working in some of the most beautiful towns in the Rockies.

Ahhh, but change was in the air, and the masses were fleeing from the large cities of either coast in droves.

For Teller this influx had only unpleasant results. Not only were these interlopers filling up his precious empty country, they brought along with them many of their unwelcome regional attitudes. And in some bizarre and unfathomable twist, seemed to want nothing more than to change the place they had come, into a different version of the place they had run from. And as they endlessly multiplied, the soul of the landscape was irrevocably altered, and Teller was left with nothing to do but follow the drifters wind.
And so he roamed from town to town, making memories for himself and leaving behind a legacy of mischief.

But now, sitting alone, and looking back at his audacious lifestyle, he found himself more than just a little amazed that, despite his own best efforts, he had not yet killed himself.

Yes, his luck seemed to always prevail.

So here he was, his luck still holding, but sitting on the precipice, both literally and metaphorically.

His injuries being inexplicably slight, and having lost none of his gear in the fall, there was little problem in reaching the river below. His larger problem however, was one of spiritual malaise, and the indefinable sense of longing that had first led him to the decision of taking a sojourn into this empty land.
So many times in his life Teller had walked away . . . he simply was not the type of man to expend his energy on wars that could not be won. Surrender was never an option, but hard earned experience had taught him that a well-timed retreat was often the wiser course of action. And his latest retreat had been from the town of Telluride.

Teller and his business partner had agreed to meet in the New Sheridan bar to discuss what Teller felt was a divergence of ethics and goals. Or more to the point, what Teller saw as his partner’s deteriorating code of ethics combined with ever-increasing greed. Following a heated discussion, Teller, true to form disappeared; and in doing so left behind a woman, a home, and a dream.

But it was this latest uprooting that had put him in his present dilemma, and that had all started with his abrupt retirement from the enviable position as a river rafting guide on the Colorado River, headquartered in Moab.

For Teller the problem was clear, and the solution simple. Leave. Leave while he still enjoyed the fast action and the adrenaline thrill of white water, because unfortunately, and as hard as he had tried to keep his annoyance suppressed, the bane of his existence had re-surfaced: crowds and boredom.

Discontent was setting in, and he was finding fewer and fewer challenges in the repetitive tours. Worse, he was becoming increasingly embittered with this new breed of adventure tourist. He saw them as a miserable collection of urban dwellers that failed to understand that by engaging in these “off the map” activities they were destroying the very thing they had come to experience. And in doing so they were turning the last of his beloved wild country into an overcrowded Disneyland.
Following a particularly grueling day trip with a group of rowdy Texans, Teller walked into the company office and told the owner. “Today was my last run Jake, I’d like to collect whatever I’m owed.”

Jake looked up in exasperation. “Goddamnit Tell! I’ve known you for how long?”

“Most of our lives.” Teller smiled.

Jake gave him an aggressive nod. “Damn right! And we’ve been through a lot together. Christ man, we’ve gotten away with more shit, had more than our share of fun, escaped the wrath of angry women, homicidal husbands, and stayed just out of the reach of the long arm of the law more often than any other two guys in this hemisphere.”

He stood, walked around the desk, and poked Teller in the chest. “And it’s a bloody miracle that both of us are not either dead or in jail. But you my friend, you have always been the most consistently inconsistent sonofabitch I have ever met!”

Throwing his hands in the air, he fell back in his chair.

“So Jesus Christ Tell, what’s the fucking problem now?”

Teller leaned forward and laid his palms on the desk, his green eyes flashing frustration.

“Ahhh, come on Jake. You and I both know that the great days of river running are fading fast. There are so many goddamn people out here now that they need to get advance reservations, and your liability insurance is so high you can barely afford to stay in business. And worse, most of these fat pricks want to come out here and play at being a bold adventurer just so they can brag to their equally fat-assed friends back east about the wild rivers they’ve conquered; but then the sonsabitches want some guarantee that they won’t get hurt doing it!!” He growled and shook his head in frustration.

“Shit, there are so many safety regulations these days that you can’t hardly even get hurt anymore.” He smiled and looked over at Jake. “And that not only takes the fun out of it, it allows people who shouldn’t even be here, to be here.”

A look of angry sadness crossed his face.
“Lawyers have convinced people that no one should ever get hurt, and that stupidity is a rewardable commodity.” He frowned, “Besides that, Moab has become a three ring circus and it just kills me to see it.”

Jake nodded, but smiled as Teller’s anger was replaced with a grin. “Hey, remember back when we were still working out the bugs with the guys on those prototype mountain bikes?”

Jake nodded again.

“Jake,” Teller laughed, “There was no one around here! The Poplar Bar was it! No crowds . . .” His face turned wistfully nostalgic, then clouded again. “And there weren’t Goddamned Jeeps crawling up every Mesa, and some clown with a rope hanging from every rock.” He sighed, “Buddy, I miss those days.”

Jake just shook his head. He’d heard variations of this rant many times, and the truth of his words always depressed him. And Teller, seeing the expression on Jake’s face, backpedaled;

“I’m sorry Man. I’m smart enough to realize the good old days are good and gone. Its just that I’m sure as hell not all that excited about the ones that have replaced ‘em.”

Jake kicked his chair back, walked around the desk, and looked Teller in the eye. “That’s your trouble Tell, you cling to the past. Brother, those days are long, long gone and they aint never comin’ back.”

Teller gave Jake a tired smile. “Yeah, but that don’t mean I don’t miss ‘em.”

Jake stabbed a finger onto Teller’s chest again, but this time with real force. “Shut up and listen. You’re making good money doing the very thing these people pay big bucks to do, and you’re damn good at it! Trust me Teller, I know it won’t be long before the Feds regulate me right out of business . . . And those attorneys you’re bitching about? Shit, Tell, I sure as hell can’t argue with you there. Between Lawyers and sue-happy assholes, most everything that was fun has been made illegal, so son, you are preachin’ to the choir.”
Going back to his desk, Jake swung the high-backed chair around, flopped back, and threw his heels up on the cluttered surface. Resting his chin on steepled fingertips he studied Teller, weighing their years of friendship.

“But the real question my friend, the big question is this . . . and I will bet you every single dime that I owe you that you haven’t bothered to ask it yourself. Just what the fuck else are you qualified for?”

And that’s how it had ended.

Franklin James Teller; Teller to most, and ‘Tell’ to a select few, smiled, and went to the old chest style coke machine that took up half of the wall next to Jake’s desk.

He had found the old thing in an abandoned bar in Uravan, brought it to the office, gutted and refinished it, and stocked it with his two favorite beers; Moosehead and Negra Modelo. And sticking his arm elbow-deep into the ice he pulled out one of each, popped them open on the side-mounted bottle opener, and holding a dripping bottle in either hand gave Jake a lopsided grin. “Ladies choice.”

Jake took the Moosehead with a sigh, and leaned back in his chair while Teller hopped up on the cooler and endeavored to explain his nebulous dissatisfaction to one of the few people he had ever confided in.

Several hours and a half-case of empties later Jake slid his boots off the desk went to the cash register and counted out Teller’s pay.

“All I can say is that it’s déjà vu’ all over again. Good luck Tell. And take care of yourself.”

Taking Teller’s hand and pressing in the bills, Jake closed his fingers around the roll, looked into Teller’s eyes and pulled him in for a quick hug. Then with a smile, he gently pushed him away, holding him by the shoulders at arms length.

“If you get the chance send a postcard . . . you’ve got great taste in postcards.” Turning, he went to his desk, flopped back into his chair, and began rummaging around in the file drawer while covertly dragging a sleeve under a moist eye.
Teller grinned and went to the door, stepping into the sunlight that spilled across the threshold; and standing in that warm afternoon light he held up the roll of cash, wiggled it between two fingers, and winked, “Thanks Jake.”

He pulled the door closed and Jake heard Teller’s boots on the stairs.

“Good luck Amigo,” he said to the door.

A few minutes later Teller turned the ignition key of his 1967 Dodge power wagon, flipped on the radio, hung his arm out the window, and headed southwest.
Teller replayed that conversation again in his head. It hadn’t been the first time his failure to accept the changes of the last couple of decades had been brought to his attention. “The future is here and it’s kicking my ass!” He laughed aloud. But this time he double-checked his knots as he prepared to drop over the edge of a cliff for the second time that day.

As he lowered himself, his subconscious took over as it had done a hundred times before, his concentration never straying from the process involved. He knew how lucky he had been. The odds were very much against a mistake like that being forgiven twice.

The descent went smoothly and as his feet transitioned from vertical to horizontal, he breathed a sigh of relief, and his eyes moved up the face of the massive wall to the rim where his rope had given way. High up, and barely visible, was the small shelf where he had landed. “Good thing I don’t bounce.” he grinned, and began coiling rope.

Once done, he clipped the line to a carabiner, slung his pack over one shoulder, and walked to the riverbank. The water was much more inviting from this vantage point.

Teller dropped the pack in the sand, and taking off his shirt, knelt, cupping his hands and letting them fill. The water was deliciously cold. He splashed the bracing liquid onto his face, shivering as it dripped down his neck and chest, then bringing another handful of water to the tender swollen area on the back of his head he gently probed the gash with his fingertips.

The area was tender, but he persevered, and when he lowered his hands back into the pool, the blood on his fingers mixed with the water creating delicate red tendrils that spread from his fingertips.
His reflection stared back at him through those frail wisps of life, and putting a hand to his chin, he turned his face from side to side, wondering what he was going to do now.

Maybe it was time for some serious re-evaluation.

That he was running was clear, but what he was running from, or where he was running to, was muddy at best. Again, unwanted memories of the woman he had recently left wormed their way into his head.

Teller’s past was littered with the shards of broken hearts and the tattered remains of love left in the wake of his headlong rush through life. And in looking back, he regretted the insensitive manner in which he had dismissed the many women who had so willingly offered themselves. Their offers had been sweet, and he had happily indulged. But he had been young and selfish, and there was a glacial corner of his soul that would not thaw despite their warmth.

He sighed as accusatory memories returned, and sharp fingers of blame poked at his heart. But even as these ghosts returned to haunt him, he took comfort in the fact that although his manner of leaving may have not always have been kind, each time he had said goodbye his conscience carried yet another weight, and he was left bleeding from dancing across the sharp edges of their sorrow.

He blinked at his reflection; resolve replacing regret. Ultimately, his pain was his own, and mattered very little to them if they knew of it at all. Turning his eyes back to the pool he asked; ‘Is it love or fear that chases me?’

His reflection had no answer.

With a sigh, he stood and breathed deeply. *Enough . . . Enough . . .”*

Tipping his head back and taking in the brilliance of the blue sky framed by the canyon walls, his ennui lifted, and with a smile he moved forward. Teller was lucky that way; the blues never colored his mood for long.
As he walked he began talking to himself. It was a habit he had indulged in for as long as he could recall; and stepping into his one-sided conversation he started today’s dialogue.

“Well, I suppose when one has no particular destination, where one ends up is of very little consequence.” he smiled, and reached up, tenderly touching the bump on the back of his skull. He winced, “Of course, one should be cautious of solid objects that are closer than they appear.” As usual, his own sense of humor lightened his mood and adjusting his pack, he turned downstream.

“Now, bowing to gravity’s whims, I shall follow this lovely river’s example and take the course of least resistance. He began walking, humming “Old Man River.”

Hiking along the river’s bank, the implications of his recent actions were foremost in his thoughts.

As far as his job went, no worries there. Jake understood him as well as anyone. Consequently, if he were so inclined he could always return. Money? Well, at least for now that wasn’t an issue. As for the truck; well, the truck was parked less than fifteen miles from a remote ranger station, and he had left a detailed note in the glove compartment instructing whomever found it to please contact Jake with it’s location.

He smiled. In a rare moment of foresight he had left the title, a bill of sale, and a spare key in a Ziploc bag in Jake’s desk. He knew Jake would take care of the old beast as it held fond memories for them both. It was a mechanically perfect, although very well used old truck that Teller had won on his twenty-seventh birthday in a drunken tree climbing contest, and as the memory of that day returned he couldn’t help but grin. The tree climbing had been the suggestion, and last pitiful effort of an overly inebriated hard rock miner he and Jake had met in a bar in the small mountain town of Silverton.
The birthday celebration had originated in Telluride, migrated over Dallas Pass, and moved west as the two of them continued their debauchery.

They managed to escape Ouray without incident, and decided to see what kind of trouble might be waiting in the next town, and as Teller *never* had to look far for trouble he found it waiting with open arms in Silverton,

It had started innocently enough, standard bar games and bullshit. But Teller was on a run, and after soundly thrashing his opponent at arm-wrestling he tried his hand at darts. Winning nine out of ten, the man accused him of somehow cheating; although just how one cheats at darts was ill defined, so to soothe the fellow’s ruffled feathers Teller offered him the chance to win back his money at pool.

Two hours later the last eight ball was sunk and Teller told him, “Sorry man, but the drunker I get the better I play.”

Jake had laid a friendly hand on the guys shoulder and backed the boast as sad fact.

The fellow was furious, but Teller’s open smile and his muscular build kept things from getting physical. But pride, as well as the pressure of his miner buddies, pushed the embarrassed and progressively drunker man to raise the stakes. And when someone in the bar suggested tree climbing with the two men’s trucks as the bet, Jake goaded Teller into accepting.

The crowd stumbled outside to a nearby stand of Spruce and Teller scampered up an eighty-foot tree like a drunken monkey.

His opponent however, was not so agile.

Making his way up through the thick needles, his labored breathing, punctuated by colorful cursing could be heard by the crowd below. But somewhere near the top a weak branch snapped, and the luckless fellow came crashing through the tree like a two hundred pound bowling ball, landing with a tremendous thud.

After checking to see if he had survived, his laughing friends propped him against the rough bark of the tree trunk,
where the bloodied and beaten man brushed the needles from his beard, and with a tear in his eye handed Teller the keys to one of the finest old 4x4s that had ever rolled out of Detroit.

The following morning Teller woke up in the front seat of that truck, reached into the cooler that had served as a neck-wrenching pillow, and removed a semi-warm beer.

Massaging his neck as he circumnavigated his new toy, he was greatly comforted by the sight of a pair of worn boots hanging over the tailgate.

He smiled. ‘So that’s what happeed to Jake.’

Circling the dented old truck twice, he bequeathed the vehicle with the title ‘Lumpy’, and christened it with the freshly emptied beer bottle.

The name was two-fold. First, in honor of the former owner, who was in less than pristine condition following his tumble out of the tree, and secondly in reference to the abused state of the vehicle.

The nickname had stuck.

Ahh, but the woman, now that was another story.
Teller’s pleasant reverie was interrupted by sounds he subconsciously recognized before he even identified them. It was the familiar yipping and shouting of a group of people crashing through the same rapids he had passed just a short while ago. His one goal had been solitude, and already the peace he was seeking had been interrupted. Grumbling, he dropped his pack and slid into the shade of a cottonwood tree.

Before long a raft came floating by, its passengers laughing and shaking off the frigid water from the rapids they had just encountered. Silently giving thanks this wasn’t another commercial tour he was doubly pleased to see an attractive girl leaning over the bow, paddle in hands, watching the current for rocks that might damage the boat.

Teller was admiring the perfect curve of her rear as she bent over the forward pontoon. But when she turned her head to call out to the oarsman he nearly choked.

It was the woman he had left in Telluride.

Turning his eyes towards the heavens he gave a tight smile, “What is it with you?”

He looked back as she tucked a wisp of hair behind a delicate shell-like ear, and was struck yet again by a depth of feeling no other woman had ever elicited.

The answer he had asked himself at the river’s edge earlier was revealed. In truth, fear had nothing to do with any of his recent actions. He was running from love.

His eyes slide over her profile once again.

Guilt rose from the depths of Teller’s conscience, and pain squeezed his heart tightly as he reflected on the selfish manner in which he had left her. Perhaps Kelly was right. More than once she had once accused him of being self-centered, although he had always considered his actions more in the arena of self-
preservation. Well, semantics aside, fate seemed fully intent on forcing him to redefine his motives. Then, over the sound of the river, Teller heard a coyote howl in the distance as if challenging him to be the man he was running from.

~

Back in the days when he and a couple of friends were organizing a little concert event they were calling the ‘Fall Creek Festival,’ Kelly had walked into his life. She was the classic outdoor beauty. Five foot six barefoot, with deep auburn hair and striking blue eyes.

He remembered well their first meeting.

She had recently been hired as a bartender at his favorite watering hole, and being new in town made her fair game for every dimwit on a stool. Teller had seen them come and go over the years but this one was different; this one had class.

She moved behind the bar with fluid grace, serving up drinks and shooting down every swinging dick with a lame pick-up line. But she did it with such casual style and subtle insult that even the most obnoxious stud left with his pride and ego still somewhat intact, but with his fantasies, as well as other body parts deftly deflated.

Teller was unsure if her success was due to her verbal skills or to the fact that her potential suitors were buffoons. His best guess was that it was both, but that the latter most heavily influenced the outcome.

Following a week or so of enjoying this nightly verbal jousting from his barstool, Teller found himself sufficiently impressed; and as he ordered another drink he told her so.

Her first response was quick, clever and cutting, which only made him smile. But there was something in that smile made her pause long enough to look into his eyes; and in place of hunger she saw sincerity, and that sparked her curiosity.

She relaxed enough to ask him just what it was that made him different.
“I paid attention to my Irish granddad when he told me never to get involved with a redhead.” he had said, rattling the ice in his glass.

“And just what did your grandfather know about redheads?” she enquired a wicked smile.

Teller knew then he would never forget that smile.

“He married one.”

Teller would also never regret what happened after that.

They spent the next three days at Dunton hot springs, and the next month in a fog of laughter and lust.

But time goes from trot to gallop when lust holds the reins, and all too soon summer arrived, bringing with it the second year of the music festival.

Spring was quickly gone with the flowers that accompany it, and July arrived, knocking on Teller’s door, and rudely dropping a heavy bundle of responsibilities into his arms.

With his position demanding ever-increasing amounts of his time, Teller introduced Kelly to the concert crew, and was immediately put to work on promotion. So, with that addition to her bartending schedule, they were both working more hours and spending less time together. And to add to his frustration, there was talk of changing the name of the festival and charging more money.

In Teller’s view the whole thing was getting out of control, and he was not silent in his dissatisfaction. Arguments ensued, and in a final meeting that those in attendance would not soon forget, Teller left town.

His leaving had been an angry reaction to multiple circumstances, and more than once he regretted not having explained the context to Kelly at the time.

But to have her show up here, now, caused him to laugh quietly, “The gods really are crazy.”

～
The raft and its passengers were moving at a much faster pace than he could walk, so he watched as they bobbed down the river, and followed along.

After a few hours of rock hopping along the riverbank, pushing through the tamarisk and river reeds, and swimming when necessary, Teller stopped to rest next to a small marsh full of cattails, and twisting one from its stalk, he stroked the velvety surface.

He had always thought the texture was too soft for a plant; to him it felt as if it should be attached to a living, breathing creature; but happy that it was not, he squeezed the soft cylinder and the brown velvet exterior gave way. White fluff exploded from its containment, expanding around his fingers and billowing out of his hand.

Shaking loose the silky, down-like seeds from his fingers he smiled as they floated gently up, and away on the cool breeze. He smiled as the airborne travellers rose, becoming lost in the Sun’s last rays. He felt a kinship to their aimless drifting, but also envy at their freedom.

Dusk came quickly in the canyon, The shadows grew quickly, and as the air cooled, the day’s sounds were replaced by the calls of evening birds as they settled in for the night, followed by the conversational croaking of frogs, and the soft splashes of feeding fish.

Teller decided to push on while there was still faint light, hoping to find a decent place to bed down beneath a Piñon or Cedar Tree. There, the ground would be covered with a bed of soft needles, and the branches would also provide protection from the inevitable dew of dawn.

So, with what little light that remained fading fast, and stepping carefully, he rounded a bend to see large flickering shadows being cast by firelight against a large expanse of rock wall not far downriver.

Intrigued, he continued, and as he ducked through a small stand of cedars he came to a halt.
Just below he saw a sandy beach tucked beneath a natural amphitheater. Here the group that passed earlier had tied off and set up camp. He watched the group interact for a minute, then, unable to resist, strode nonchalantly out of the darkness and into the circle of firelight whistling loudly.

All conversation ceased, and everyone in the group turned to see who, or what, in the hell was creeping around the canyon in the night.

Teller held out his arms, and turning full circle, theatrically spoke; “Greetings river rats! ‘Tis I, The canyon King! Protector of all rodents aquatic, second cousin to Neptune, and nephew to the scaly skink . . . Fear not! I bring you no harm but have come to bestow my blessings upon thee!”

The stunned silence was broken by the slow, appreciative applause of a large bearded man. The rest of the group looked to one another in curious confusion. As the applause died Teller heard a faint ‘click’ to his right.

Turning in the direction of that sound, he faced the woman from the raft. She pointed a small caliber handgun at his head.

“Kelly,” He grinned, “it’s not healthy to carry this kind of anger, you need to learn to let go.”

A half-smile crossed her lips, and un-cocking the weapon, she took two quick strides across the sand. With gun still in her hand she reached behind Teller’s head, laid the cold barrel against the back of his skull, and pulled his face to hers and gave him a savage kiss. With her other hand she reached down, grabbed his balls and squeezed tightly.

“Its good to see you too, you sonofabitch.”