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## WINTERKILL

By  
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Every place Renzie Zozpah cleared away the snow there were dead trout underneath the ice. Most were rainbows and some were big. They'd been dealt a double deathblow. Like it had been waiting all winter, it snowed in March. The deep new snow insulated the ice from the sun, so instead of thawing, it froze deeper, reducing the available oxygen, suffocating the trout. For some reason, a few brook trout survived. Maybe they were hardier because they were not really trout but a more northern fish--char.

He picked up his shovel and started across the lake. The sight of Jesse waiting for him on the dock lifted his spirits. Jesse was like the mountains beyond, forever there even when she had every reason not to be.

As he got closer he could see that the person on the dock was not Jesse. Instead it was someone dressed like her. The figure lifted its arm like the starter at a foot race. In that same moment something flickered at the edge of Renzie's vision. Awareness whispered, "You are a target . . ." Reacting to instinct honed by generations of Apache

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scouts and sharpened in the jungles of Southeast Asia, Renzie flattened himself in the snow.

Except for the flapping wings of a solitary raven, the lake was silent.

*"Aren't you on your own Reservation with your own people?" he asked himself.*

*"So why are you acting so foolish?"*

Renzie rolled onto his side and brushed the snow from his eyebrows and lips. Lifting his head, he shaded his eyes against the brutal glare of sun on snow. The figure on the dock was gone and there was no one to be seen within the narrow strip of green-black pines that spilled from the mountains to touch the lake below the lodge.

The metallic flash was like the wink of a damselfly's eye and Renzie knew too late that his instincts had been correct. He fell into his own imprint, arms and legs flailing, creating the snow angel his weeping sister would say at his funeral had escorted him to his heavenly home.

\* \* \*

I've never really hated anyone, not my Vietnamese captors, my ex-wife's lawyer, or Lt. Mendoza for putting me on administrative leave. But I was beginning to hate Sandy. Not for taking the house, both bank accounts, or our two Siamese. Climbing out of the Salt River Canyon I was passed by a frigging motor scooter, which is more than enough reason to hate anyone.

My ex-machine had been universally accepted as "Beamer's Bimmer." Two of my cop buddies testified to that in court. The judge didn't agree. For drowning my

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marriage in Jack Daniel's I got to keep eleven large bore firearms, tent, propane lantern, fly rod, one reel, and two thousand flies I tied before I became a certified drunk.

Not to mention Sandy's '82 Rabbit diesel that has about as much punch as Pee Wee Herman.

Whatever the hell a motor scooter was doing on the twisting switchbacks between Globe and the White Mountains is anyone's guess. Maybe the rider couldn't afford Dr. Death?

Me? I'm headed for the White Mountain Apache Fish and Game Headquarters in Whiteriver to meet my old U of A buddy, Rick Istee. He called to tell me that when the sister of one of his wardens asked him to recommend a cop to investigate the investigation of her brother's shooting, I was the only one he could think of. Rick saw the article on the mall parking lot shooting that mentioned I'd been put on administrative leave and no date had been set for the Police Commission hearing.

"All true," I told him, "and I'm getting pretty sick of the soaps. But I can't accept pay."

"I sort of figured that, and--well, we talked it over." He hesitated. "How does thirty days on Christmas Tree Lake sound?"

*High country wilderness, big native Apache trout, twenty anglers max, flies and lures only--seven hundred and fifty bucks worth of my kind of lake.*

"You can do that?"

"Bring along your float tube."

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Rick's call was followed by the sister's. Vina Zozpah said her brother, Renzie, had been shot in early March on the frozen lake near the ski area. He's been checking winterkill before ice-out, and was headed for shore when a bullet struck his chest just below the collarbone. A maid at Sunrise Lodge saw him go down but hadn't heard a shot. Nobody did. The feds say snow muffled the sound. Vina Zozpah thought it was a silencer. In the heavy brush down around at sea level, a shot can be hard to hear, but in the mountains at nine thousand feet, a rifle can sound like a howitzer

Before leaving for the White Mountains, I contacted my friend in high places who faxed the official report. Two months of investigation by tribal law enforcement and FBI read like toilet paper. They'd written it off as a random shooting--a real horselaugh. I called Rick to let them know I was coming, and asked about possible motives.

"We write citations, which gets some people riled. They think they got a right to catch or shoot whatever they want. Also--" Rick cut himself off, as though he'd already said too much.

"Go on."

"Well, Renzie was sort of like you, a rabble rouser."

I'd never thought of myself that way but who am I to judge? I asked, "What do you think?"

"Poacher."

"So why did the feds throw in the towel?"

"Maybe 'cause Renzie was an alcoholic."

"Was he drunk when he got shot?"

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“He quit drinking two years ago. For good.”

Nobody quits for good, but I could relate: Renzie Zozpah had been a brother.

\* \* \*

As I chug through the last of the switchbacks high above the silver thread of the Salt River, I know if I keep taking jobs like this I'll be driving a clunker forever.

An hour later I'm getting out of the Rabbit in front of Fish and Game Headquarters. Rick greets me on the step. He's put on more than a few pounds and his hair is longer and blacker than I remember. His tailored uniform and expensive gear impresses me, especially the revolver, Smith & Wesson's new .500 Magnum. After we shake hands and slap backs, he asks where I left my Bimmer.

I cast a disparaging glance in the direction of the diesel and utter one burned-out word, "Sandy."

Rick does well to suppress whatever he feels, instead giving me his Indian-screwed look. "Beamer," he says, "that woman got you."

I try to be equally inscrutable. "She deserved it." We'd drained a few barrels in college, so Rick knew. "Which is all history now," I add.

"Let's walk." Rick had picked up a permanent limp from a Quantrang land mine but it wasn't slowing him down. I'm not used Whiteriver's 6,500-foot altitude and am puffing to keep up. We stop at the edge of the highway to let a stream of pickups trapped behind an RV pass.

"You really beat the booze?" Rick made it sound important.

"Me and Bill W." I reply as though only the two of us ever made it.

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"I wish you and Bill could teach people here." Rick swept an arm in the direction of a weed field heaped with wine bottles that towered above the sunflowers.

"How about you, Kemo Sabe?" I ask. "As I recall, you tipped a few."

"Yeah, as you recall. Hate to say this Beamer, but those empty barrels were yours."

"You speak with fork-ed tongue, Redskin."

Rick grins, the gold caps on the front teeth that had been chipped by shrapnel glinting in the midday sun. "So I'd better not offer you a beer, huh?"

"You do and I'll kill you." More than likely I'd kill for the beer.

We angle across the littered lot to a shaded side street. We stop under the cottonwoods in front of a single story frame house, porch and siding paint peeling. "Renzie's sister lives here," Rick says. We start up the blackened, uneven slabs of concrete. "I warned her to watch out for you."

If I expected to see an overweight woman in a squaw dress, I'm glad I didn't say so. I usually don't stereotype, but this time I'm surprised. Vina Zozpah is about a hair short of five feet. In her denim shorts and white halter she could pass for a sophomore trying out for cheerleading. Her face tells another story. She invites us into her house, a basic rectangle divided into rooms, like my grandparents grew up in.

"This is Beamer," Rick says to Vina, then to me, "Vina's a therapist up at the Hospital."

The buildings at the other end of town are big, important, and out of place.

Vina touches my hand. "I moonlight at the casino too."

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"Pay's a lot better," Rick adds.

Vina points us to a trio of worn, overstuffed chairs. When we're seated she turns to Rick. "How's the bum?"

Rick mumbles something.

"Rick went up to Sunrise," she says. "And broke something."

"My butt, skiing," Rick finishes for her.

Vina laughs. She's not seeing humor in Rick's injury, she explains, so much as the way she fixed it.

"She's right," Rick agrees. "Vina fixed my butt by standing on it."

Vina covers her mouth with her hand but can't hide the sound. "It's true," she says, "I walked on Rick's butt."

Rick suddenly realizes he's worn his hat into the house and removes it as though he's swatting a fly, still laughing. "So if you ever need someone to walk on your butt, check in at the Whiteriver Hospital and ask for Vina."

Our laughter slowly fades as the conversation works around to what had been, before the month of March, a source of humor in Whiteriver. Her brother Renzie, she says, did voices that broke up everyone. "John Wayne, the Duke, was his specialty," she says. "Now see here, Pil-grum." Her impersonation is halfway credible and I would like to hear the rest, but there is work to do--and trout to net.

"So who would want to harm the Duke?" I ask soberly.

Vina placid expression suddenly cracks but she doesn't cry. "I'm not sure--" Her eyes lock on Rick's, imploring, *Should I tell?*

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"Go ahead," Rick answers quietly.

She folds her hands on her lap and leans forward. "The bullet entered Renzie here." She presses a spot just below her collarbone. "And it went through him like this." She draws her finger downward, then reaches around to her mid back. "And came out here. And nobody heard the shot. Random shooters don't use silencers. So how could it have been a random shooting? They say Renzie was checking for dead fish and looked up, maybe at a bird, just when the shot ricocheted off the ice. So if Renzie was looking up at a bird, how come the bullet didn't come out at the base of his skull? I work at the hospital. I saw Renzie. The bullet went all the way through and came out of his lower back."

"You think a poacher might've shot your brother?"

"People do crazy things."

"A maid at the Lodge saw him go down," Rick says.

"But that's all," Vina adds. "She thought he was fooling around, making a snow angel."

"Is she still at the Lodge?"

"Lodge's closed 'til fall, so she left. She's Anglo."

I turn to Rick. "You have thoughts on who might've shot Renzie?"

"I've not thought about much else." Rick rubs his chin, trying to look thoughtful. "One guy jumps in my mind. Renzie cited him for exceeding the legal limit--lots of times--and for poaching an elk. Hell, he thought Christmas Tree was his own private pond. For free!"



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“Who is he?”

“Dale Palm.”

Vina’s reaction to the name is not easy to miss. “You know him?” I ask.

There is what we used to call, a pregnant pause. Rick clears his throat and utters something unintelligible. Vina jumps in with, “Dale was my boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?”

“Was.” Shrugging, Vina continues, “Dale-- ah Dale-- how should I put it, Rick?”

“Dale hated Renzie’s guts.” Rick lets out a long sigh. “Seems like Renzie nailed him about every other week--”

“Not that often,” Vina interrupts.

“Anyway, Dale thought Renzie was picking on him.” Rick glanced at Vina. “For other reasons.”

I mull that one over, then, “Can I talk to Renzie’s wife?”

“Jesse--she lives up the canyon,” Vina stands all five feet of herself in front of me and volunteers to drive.

“We can use my car,” I answer.

“You call that a car?”

\* \* \*

Vina does a hell of a job negotiating her Chevy Pickup on the winding dirt road through the pines down into Whiteriver Canyon. Her driving also gives me time to ask questions while appraising the potential. As Sandy was fond of saying, “never out of character.” As we pass a camping site, I consider asking her to camp out and might still.

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I wish she didn't remind me of my teenage daughter. So I keep quiet as she tells me about Renzie's opposition to the casinos springing up on all the reservations.

"The one we have is doing so well they want to open another." She frowns. "On Sunrise Lake. They want to build a chopper port to bring in rich gamblers!" She shakes her head. "Can you imagine the noise? And they want to cut down the trees to make big parking lots so people can play more slot machines."

We pull into a narrow lane littered with pinecones and lined with wildflowers, and park just short of a house overgrown with wild grape vines. A blood red Ford pickup is parked on the far side, under an oak. Waiting for Vina to take the lead, I breathe in the dense canyon scent of spring. It's the perfume of snowmelt, old leaves, dead bark, and springtime. Ask any stream fisherman.

Vina comes around the car, and just as she turns to speak, the blast of a high-powered rifle shatters the river music. I throw my arm around Vina and rush us both to the edge, taking her on top of me as I fall to the shelter of the embankment. Our bodies press together against the riverbank. My feet are getting wet and when I pull them from the water I see a trout rising.

Vina starts to squirm. I tell her to hold still.

"Aren't you going to do something?"

"My fly rod and waders are in the Rabbit."

"Not funny," she says. Apparently Vina's laughter is reserved for less stressful situations.

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I reach around; yank my Walther from its belt holster, and scramble up the embankment. I peek over the edge and sweep the barrel across the dense underbrush where the shot came from. I see nothing. The only sounds are behind me, the gurgling of the White River, the hushed splashes of rising trout, and Vina's gentle laugh. I remove myself as a potential target and slide down beside her.

"What are you giggling about?"

"I just caught on. You saw fish jumping."

"Yeah, rotten timing."

Another voice intrudes. "What're you doing down there, Vina, making out with the gonzo?"

The woman standing the embankment wears a squaw dress. It's hard to tell but she appears to be about fifty, with streaks of gray, and handsome, sharp features. A vintage Model 94 Winchester lever action is clutched in her right hand.

Vina looks up, "Ah--Jesse, this is Mister Franklin Beamer. He's come here to find out who shot Renzie."

\* \* \*

Her shot, Jesse Zozpah says, was only a warning. "Thought you was one of them bad guys," she explains in an obvious attempt to duplicate her deceased husband's John Wayne impression. She flashes a toothy off-center smile. The streamside perfume is overpowered by the scent of wine. She waves us to follow the path to the grapevine-covered house.

"Is that a 30-30?" I ask about the rifle.

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Jesse stops, turns and scowls. “Thirty-two Special.”

The inside of the house can best be described as unkempt. The sink overflows with dirty dishes. The sofa and table are old and beat up; the cane seat of the rocking chair Jesse plops herself into has pulled loose on two sides. Next to the rocker a produce crate turned on end serves as a table. Inside, a half empty, three-liter bottle of Livingstone Cellars Burgundy anchors the base. The glass on top is two-thirds empty. She lays the Winchester across her lap, plucks the glass, raises it in a half-assed salute, and drains it. As an afterthought, she asks if we would like to join her.

Vina scowls. “Since when did you start drinking in the middle of the day?”

“My, my.” Jesse rolls her eyes. “It’s the *middle* of the day?”

Vina glances at her tiny wristwatch. “One fifty, to be exact.”

“So?” She drags out the “o” in comic-shock surprise. “It’s five o’clock somewhere.” She gets a big drunken grin. “Har, har, lil’ pil-grum.”

Vina starts to say something, but I cut her off. “Mrs. Zozpah, do you know of anyone who might’ve harbored hard feelings against your husband?”

“You mean, besides me?”

\* \* \*

Vina arranges for me to stay at the Hon-Dah, the resort casino a short piece up the mountain from Whiteriver. I spend the early part of the evening in my room digging into the FBI report. Most of it skips over the imponderables--such as, what is the percentage of a random shot taking down anyone standing in the middle of a frozen lake? My guess

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is zero. Just as I'm getting tired of the boring discourse and thinking of exercising my blackjack skills, I hit upon a paragraph that stirs my interest:

... possible suspect, Dale Dwight Palm, was incarcerated in the Showlow jail for DUI and not released until the day after the shooting.

My buddy "Doubt" begins to gnaw on my thoughts. Someone isn't owning-up. To be sure, I call the jail for his release address. They won't give it to me, which is okay. I just wanted to confirm that he'd been there.

After hanging up, I decide to mull over the situation at a blackjack table.

I have no trouble finding one. All corridors lead to the casino. Mine takes me past a giant stone monolith in the lobby covered with stuffed critters. The elk especially impresses me.

Only one table is dealing. I take the stool at third base, exchange a twenty for four chips, and bet the five-dollar minimum. I lose half my paltry stake and give-and-take for five or so more hands before my luck turns. I win two and double up. The dealer busts. Two hours later, I exchange eight green chips for two blacks and toss the dealer the leftover red five.

The dealer, a very large Apache named Charlie comments, "You're a real good blackjack player."

I thank him and say, "I should be. One of my ex-wife's a dealer."

"So's one of mine," Charlie says. "But I still lose."

I go to the cashier cage, collect \$200, and when I start to head for the Indian Pine Restaurant, Charlie's exact opposite gets in my way.

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“Pardon me.” I step aside to go around.

The short, skinny fellow with truly pale skin places his hand on my arm.

“Someone said you were looking for me.”

I study him a moment, then, “Dale Dwight Palm?”

\* \* \*

Instead of dining at the casino, I think it prudent to drive into Pinetop. Dale suggests Charlie Clark’s Steakhouse, which has a significant line waiting to be seated. For an ex-boozer, waiting is the hard part. There’s a big gong that goes off a five sharp and, unless you never had a drinking problem, just about knocks you down with the force of its attraction. Dale and I wait in the bar where everyone is drinking, including Dale (at my expense--all of this is at my expense). Another twenty minutes of sheer hell. I have my usual two club soda cocktails, a drink that down in Mexico goes by the name of *agua con gas*. It stimulates the booze buds at the base of the tongue, without doing anything to relieve the desire.

We’re shown to a table. Dale Palm selects the New York strip and I order the center cut ribeye. As soon as we’ve ordered, Dale rattles the ice cubes in his empty glass. When I’ve treated him to another, he settles back and gets down to particulars.

“I was in jail,” he says.

“I know that.” I study the bubbles in *con gas*. “They say you and Renzie didn’t exactly get along.”

“Untrue. We all have jobs and he was just doing his. I knew that.”

“So why would they say such a thing?”

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“Vina and Rick, right?”

I nod.

“Vina and me--” Dale waits for the salads to be placed in front of us.

“We broke up because of Rick.”

I wait.

“Rick hates drinkers. His dad was a boozer. So was his mom. His two sisters are in rehab. Vina and he--well, she broke it off. Said his prejudice against drinkers would make it impossible for him and her mom to ever get along. Renzie was a drinker too, but he quit--like you. Anyway, Rick still likes her, so when I came along-- well, he didn't like it.”

We finish our salads and I wait until after the steaks arrive to ask, “Who do you think shot Renzie?”

Dale glances up from his plate. “They say it was random.”

“Assume it wasn't. Who would you pick?”

“Well . . . Renzie was pretty dead set against casinos--and we know who runs them.”

“The casino already exists. What could he do?”

“The new casino, up on the lake. They want to put in a heliport and all sorts of crap. Renzie was dead-set against it.”

What, I wonder, could a game and fish warden do to hold up a casino? “It isn't likely he would be shot for that.”

Dale looks at me like he knows something.

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“Or is it?”

He lowers his voice. “I value my life.” He checks out the customers. “Besides, you’ll just think I’m trying to get even or something.”

“Go on.”

“Rick--he’s into the casino. Check it out.”

\* \* \*

Dale wouldn’t say more than that, so I spend my late evening wondering what he meant by saying Rick was “into” the casino. The next morning I decide to check it out. From a phone call to ADOG, Arizona Department of Gaming in Phoenix, I learn that tribes unable to profitably operate gaming on their lands can transfer their rights to other tribes. A dozen or so inquiries later, I find someone who has a list of supporters for the proposed lake casino, and one name jumps out: Rick Istee.

I return Hon-Dah asking myself why Rick would want a casino on Sunrise Lake? Wouldn’t that go against his life’s work, preserving fish and game, which also means preserving the wilderness? Apaches are renowned for keeping the environment intact. If it weren’t for them and other tribes, Arizona would probably become wall-to-wall condos connected by hundred yard swaths of concrete--a la California.

The message light is blinking on my room phone. It’s from Rick, reminding me to check in at the Outdoor Sport shop before I go to Christmas Tree Lake. He says it’s all arranged, but they need to know I’ll be there.



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Just the thought of those native Apache trout weakens my knees. I decide I deserve a break and call the Sport Shop. When I tell the fellow who answers who I am, he comes back with, “Beamer, Christmas Tree, tomorrow, right?”

“Right.”

My mind is focused on a hot shower and meal when interrupted by the room’s picture window shattering and the “thump-thump” of an old-fashioned pineapple hand grenade bouncing across the hardwood floor. I take to the wood behind the bed, ball up and hold my ears, bracing for an explosion that never comes.

When I’m sure it’s well past due, I pick up the little beauty, check that it’s been neutered, and step through the newly created opening. Two Apache teenagers head my way, so I look around, find a stone bordering the flower garden and pick it up.

“What’s wrong, man?” one of the lads asks.

I weigh the rock in my hand and try to look stern (as opposed to shaken), gesturing toward the missing glass. “Did one of you throw this?”

The boys back off, glancing at each other. “Not us, man,” the talkative one says. “It was the dude in the pickup.”

Which narrows it down to nine-tenths of the Apache nation.

\* \* \*

I find Vina in the small office behind the reception desk filing papers. Without looking up, she says, “I hear someone broke your window.”

“Yeah, I should scrape that Custer for Governor sticker off my bumper.”

Vina turns slightly, giving me that inscrutable “You’re full of it” look.

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“Yeah--well...” I take the grenade out of my coat pocket. “See many of these around?”

“Maybe in John Wayne movies. No--the boys told me you said a rock broke your window.”

“I didn’t say a rock did it. I asked if they threw a rock.”

Vina shakes her head. “You and Rick!”

“We went to school together.”

“So I hear.” She sits back in her chair.

“Yeah.” I stand there looking stupid, not quite knowing how to ask.

“Something wrong?”

“No--just a question that’s been bothering me.”

“I think the answer is no.”

I chuckle. “Not that--I mean, why is Rick pushing the lake casino?”

Vina ponders before answering. “Alcoholism. He thinks another casino will make the money needed to build rehab centers and provide education so people can kick the habit.”

“It’s not a habit, Vina. It’s an addiction.”

“I know that, even if Rick doesn’t. He just wants help the poor by ridding the reservation of alcoholism. He’s not only doing it for the Apache, also another tribe that can’t afford a casino.”

“Good Shepherd, right?”

“Something like that.”

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I ask if she'd like to join me for dinner.

"Thanks, but I have to stay by the desk until the others are through eating." Vina says she will assign me a new room and send someone to move my stuff. I'm to pick up the key after I eat.

This evening I steer clear of blackjack and go directly to the Indian Pine Restaurant. I have a Southbank chicken Caesar and hand-tossed calzone pizza.

When I stop back by the registration desk to pick up my new key, Vina has already left--I assume. I'm more than a little surprised to find her watching TV in my room. She clicks it off as soon as I enter. "I hope you don't mind. And I hope you don't take this for something else. I talked to Jesse. She thinks she may have seen the pineapple on someone's desk."

"At Fish and Game?"

"She won't say. She wants to talk to you in person."

\* \* \*

I have trouble finding the vine-covered house in the dark, until I spot the blood red pickup parked under the oak. Jesse comes out onto the porch wearing a worn blue bathrobe. She's attempted makeup and her hair is braided. She's also sober.

"Vina called. Come inside, I have coffee on."

The interior of the house has been tidied and scrubbed. It almost looks habitable. The dirty dishes have been cleaned and stacked but not put away. The curtain separating us from the bedroom is pushed aside so I can see the bed, made up and turned back.

She brings me a mug of coffee and hovers as I take my first sip.

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“Hot enough?”

I look up into those dark brown eyes and nod.

“You want to go to bed?”

“Sure.”

Quick and even a bit tender, it's a widow's dance: plenty of pent-up frustration, little emotion, then over. We're too old for cigarettes so we pour another hot mug of coffee.

“I almost forgot,” Jesse says. She smiles but she is not happy.

I check myself from saying, “Me too.” Instead I try for a quiet happy look.

Finally, Jesse speaks, “Rick said you're in some kind of trouble.”

“I'll probably be fired.”

“What did you do?”

“I shot a sixteen-year-old named Julio in a mall parking lot. He was holding a knife to a woman's throat.”

“Rape?”

“He wanted her car.”

“They're going to fire you for stopping a car jacking?”

“It was a fake knife.”

“But--”

“Six of Julio's gangbanger buddies testified it was a joke.”

“Some joke.”

“Yeah, on me.”

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“They’re not going to believe those gonzos, are they?”

“Unfortunately . . .” I let out a long breath. “I was off-duty, out of my jurisdiction and--this was number three.”

“Three? I don’t understand.”

“My third shooting--so far no fatalities.” I knock on the wooden bedpost.

“You were cleared of the first two, weren’t you?”

“They’re calling me ‘trigger happy,’ they being the new mayoral candidate and the media.”

Jesse shakes her head, and after a moment’s pause, asks, “So what do you need to know?”

It takes me another moment to realize she’s changed the subject. “Tell me about the grenade.”

“It was a souvenir of Vietnam. Rick used it for a paperweight.”

“And the casinos?”

For a good minute Jesse just meditates. It’s going to be hard for her, so I don’t push. Finally, she says, “They were skimming.”

“Renzie and Rick?”

She barely nods. “Rick lives in a gated community in Pinetop--” She moves her hand sideways through air. “And we got this.”

I wait.

“They both got on the tribal gaming commission. That’s when it started. Just a little bit at first. Then lots. The booze had already got Renzie, then it was the gambling.

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It wasn't just him. A lot of people got addicted to the spinning wheels. Rick was one who didn't."

"So he became rich?"

"Yes, Rick got rich. But he wasn't satisfied. He learned about buying the rights from other tribes to build more casinos, so he thought it would be a great idea--probably a great opportunity for more skimming--to build out by the lake, you know, by the ski slopes. They'll build a chopper pad, or whatever you call it, and bring in rich people.

"Renzie wouldn't have nothing to do with it. Renzie's first love wasn't booze--he quit that. It wasn't gambling either. And it sure wasn't me. He loved the outdoors. That's why he was on the frozen lake checking for dead fish. For Renzie, putting a casino up in the high country was about the worst thing he could think of. He told Rick he wouldn't hear of it, but Rick had his mind set, so Renzie threatened to tell about their skimming."

She looks up to make sure I understand the seriousness of what she is saying.

I start to reach for her hand but she pulls it away, shaking her head slightly.

"What are you going to do?" she asks.

"I'm not sure. Rick will deny everything and, if backed into a corner, dump it all on Renzie." I don't tell her that, first thing in the morning, I'm going fishing and afterwards look for chinks in her story. If it holds water, I'll take the next step--whatever that might be. I get up to leave.

"Where you going?"

"Back to Hon-Dah."

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Jesse looks suddenly worried. “Don’t.” I can see that her concern is not for me directly, but for my safety. She doesn’t want me to get shot.

\* \* \*

I’m awake before first light, dress quickly, and stand over Jesse a little while trying to decide if I should wake her. She’s snoring lightly so I decide not to, but as I turn to leave, she sits up and asks, “Aren’t you going to do something?”

“I need to think this over and the best place I know of is Christmas Tree Lake.”

She searches my soul with those dark brown eyes. “Yes,” she says, “Renzie loved Christmas Tree.”

It’s starting to get light as I leave pavement and move down the long dirt road that will take me to the lake. I pass a black bear foraging the berry browse growing in a burnout between stands of aspen. Farther on, two cow elk study me with apathetic eyes. At the final turnoff, a flock of wild turkeys scoot between the pines and disappear in a flat choked with ferns.

There are two boats, one up each arm of the lake. I remove my float tube from the back seat, hook it up to the air compressor that runs off the cigarette lighter, and pull on my waders. I assemble my four-piece Orvis fly rod, seat the lightweight reel, and thread the guides. I attach a seven-foot tapered leader and tie on my favorite dry fly, a #16 Adams. The safety belt, that will keep water out of my waders, has vanished. By the time I find it wedged behind the seat, the tube’s several cells have inflated. I slip my toes into the flippers, adjust the rubber straps, insert myself into the float tube, and waddle down the boat ramp far enough into the water to kick-start in the direction of the

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dam. As I move past reeds lining the shore, I lay the Adams in close. A fat Apache trout takes the fly on the first cast.

After releasing several trout in the twelve to fourteen inch range, I let myself drift, taking in the dazzling scenery, and air so fresh I can taste it.

I change to a beaded hare's ear, letting it sink deeper with each cast. My flippers have driven me out into the apex of the two arms, so I let the gentle wind push me back towards the reeds. I'm about a hundred feet out when a solid strike nearly yanks the rod out of my hand. The rod tip bends in on itself as the fish surges deeper. The tussle lasts about five minutes before he gives up. I lean to slip the net under the fish. He looks to be about eighteen inches--a tad large for my catch-and-release net. As I stretch further, I hear my tube pop and feel the concussion of a bullet tearing through the water. Even though I've not heard a shot, a microsecond later I realize that, like Renzie Zozpah, I'm being used for target practice.

I slide out of the tube and, something like Custer, go down with my waders on. My flippers touch bottom and I crouch slightly to spring like an astronaut on the moon, kicking and bobbing my way to the reeds. For now, the safety belt keeps the water from filling my waders, but I can feel water slowly tickling down my legs to my feet. Presently the water becomes shallow enough so I can keep my nose above the surface. I move into the reeds, turning just in time to see my float tube explode and sink out of sight.

The other fishermen apparently don't see anything. They stay anchored to their respective fishing spots until a single blast from a high-powered rifle resonates through



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the wilderness like a jet breaking the sound barrier. The boats move in my direction but hold up when silence returns.

I wait and crawl out, moving stealthily toward the parking lot where Rick's pickup sits alone and unoccupied. On the ground by the open driver's side, Rick is sprawled and very dead, shot just below the collarbone. His rifle is on the front seat. I pick it up, unscrew the silencer, and place the rifle on the rear window rack. I pocket the silencer, along with four spent shell casings. I jog across the parking lot, stow my equipment, start up the Rabbit, and head for home.

A couple hours later, when I'm back into cell phone territory, I check for calls. There is only one. Mendoza wants me to call.

"Beamer," he says, "where the hell have you been?"

"Fishing."

"They held the hearing without you."

"And?"

"It didn't go well."

I surprise myself how easy it is. "I'll turn in my badge tomorrow morning."

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The same newspaper edition that announces my early retirement also covers the Reservation incidents. Federal authorities, the article reads, have widened their investigation into the shootings deaths of two White Mountain Apache Game and Fish wardens in the past three months. The article compares similarities and speculates that a poaching issue may have provoked the killings. It was also notes that the only clue to the

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second killing is the bullet recovered from the body of Warden Rick Istee, a Winchester .32 special.

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